

**(Im)possible Obamas:
An historical geography of alternative futures**

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Abstract: As the first African-American to win US presidency, Barack Obama's victory arguably ranks alongside of Andrew Jackson's election in 1828 - and in fact surpasses JFK's inspired but tainted success in 1960. Young, charismatic, and communicatively gifted, Obama is nonetheless a pragmatic tactician who, like FDR in 1932, has moved to the center as a general election candidate in order to try to secure both electoral victory and a workable coalition for post-election governance. Moreover, in some people's minds supposedly "neoliberal times" and the deleterious legacies of George W. Bush's catastrophic administration blunt an overdue progressive turn in US history. In the face of his victory, then, what kind of 'progress' might Obama bring about? This article interrogates this question from historical and geographical perspectives, wherein extant developments at the national and global scales are analyzed within the context of Obama's historical performance. Special attention is paid to the role of catastrophe in providing opportunities for progressive presidential programs.

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“The history of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe.”

— Walter Benjamin

“It is hard to imagine a more disastrous presidency
than that of George W. Bush.”

— Francis Fukuyama

1. Introduction

It is not easy to make the state of Iowa riveting to people that are not from the state of Iowa. But Barack Obama, a first-term US senator from Illinois, did just that on January 3, 2008. In winning the Iowa Caucus by a surprisingly comfortable 9-point margin over the then ‘inevitable’ candidate of party power, Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY), Obama never really looked back; he began to consolidate a brand new political coalition with the first of his many primary season victory speeches between January and June, the most remarkable six months of American politics since the autumn of 2000 and arguably since the first half of 1968: “They said this day would never come,” he intoned,

They said this country was too divided; too disillusioned to ever come together around a common purpose.... In lines that stretched around schools and churches; in small towns and big cities; you came together as Democrats, Republicans and Independents to stand up and say that we are one nation; we are one people; and our time for change has come (Obama, 2008a).

Much has been made of Obama’s historical imagination. Sensing and capitalizing on an abstract but majority hunger for a post-Bush world, Obama’s generic mantra of “change” – “Change we can believe in” – promises war-weary, economically-scared, and ecologically-concerned voters a new direction for the United States. In terms of historical change, in particular, Obama is most passionate when he discusses his generational frustrations with the social left’s clashes with the social right, a divisive mêlée he traces to the eventually corrosive politics of the 1960s

– and thus to lightning-rod figures like the Clintons and former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich – but also to the Karl Rovean politics of fear in the exclusive service of GOP hegemony (Green, 2007).

But Obama also paints geographical imaginaries. While just barely (though not stylistically) a Boomer, he envisages a strong ‘post-Boomer’ world, emphasizing his ability to get “Democrats, Republicans and Independents to stand up and say that we are one nation,” a nation where, to restate his own prose, the civic and the scared, the rural and the urban, cohabitate once again.¹ This lofty, ethereal romanticism is perhaps why he is so appealing to young (or at least college-going) voters, who voted for him by 2-to-1 margins.

But there is, it seems, much more than romance. A former community organizer (by choice) for the traumatized, structurally discarded neighborhoods of Black Chicago, Obama concretely understands the unromantic heat of the block fight, notwithstanding his “Obambi” critics on the left (Tracinski, 2008). More, he is a former college professor capable of the deftest writing and emotive oratory – even as he eschews theory for theory’s sake. Finally, Obama seems to understand how nascent net-root spaces have technologically shifted the very ground of electoral campaigns. Barack Hussein Obama, the first African-American to win the US Presidency, remarkably is also the first candidate for president who did not need public financing. He is, in a word, rare: a “global” figure by dint of birth and temperament.

Obama’s geographical imaginary is also far-reaching in scale. This was on display in Berlin last July, for instance, when he spoke to a crowd of 200,000, more than twice the figure JFK famously attracted in 1963. Like JFK, Obama associated the performance of urban citizenship with global geopolitics.² Linking US challenges with trans-national ones, Obama called upon European audiences to recognize the fresh opportunity for a renewed North Atlantic unity of purpose. But as Michael Kreile notes, German (and all other) enthusiasm for Obama (such

¹Interestingly, John McCain’s original ability to attract independents (and Democrats) likely reflects his pre-Boomer, 1950s-like cultural orientation towards patriotism, service, duty and honor – “neutral” words he used repeatedly to express himself (and others he likes).

² While JFK’s phrase, “*Ich bin ein Berliner*,” is the most famous from this speech, his mantra that, for those doubts the future of global democracy, “Let them come to Berlin.” Obama did the same thing, repeating several times the interesting phrase: “People of Berlin, People of the World” (Obama, 2008d).

as it is) “...mainly comes from an aversion toward George Bush, his presidency and the Iraq War. [There is] the hope that American foreign policy will become more oriented towards multilateralism and more respectful of human rights and domestic rights. Everyone feels and hopes that these things will change with Obama” (quoted in Reddy, 2008)

If Walter Benjamin is mostly right, if progress truly grows from, not only the idea but the experience of catastrophe, then Obama has a real historical opportunity to forge progressive spaces in the coming years. For George W. Bush and his coterie have left to posterity a governance landscape deeply scarred and heavily traumatized by the worst kind of American power: from the Ozone layer to the Lower Ninth in New Orleans; from ethnically cleansed neighborhoods in Iraq to extra-constitutional phone surveillance and *Abu Ghraib*. For Obama, then, simply not being Bush is a real service. The country and world are more than ready. But what else can we expect from this newcomer to power, this product of Black Kenya and White Kansas; Hawaii and Indonesia; New York City and Iowa? What seems possible and impossible, especially with respect to progressive traditions of US governance that, I shall argue here, remain available as part and parcel of the country’s “usable past”? What alternative futures might we envisage?

2. Default county: Conservative America

Those who expect little from President Obama — who conclude, whether from the right or the left, that a progressive Obama is, in a word, *impossible* — need only invoke the most obvious features of American political culture. Here the argument is compelling in its entirely plausible simplicity: the progressive use of central state power — of which more below — has been and will likely continue to be severely blunted by the empirical reality that, at bottom, America is a politically conservative nation, perhaps even “the most conservative developed nation in the world,” as Ed Glaeser (2004) has put it, an idea explored originally and more comprehensively by Seymour Lipset (1963; cf. Morrill, 2001).

Compared with other economically developed societies, that is, Americans are: more likely to believe the poor are not structurally trapped but individually lazy; less desirous of economic regulation by the central, regional and local state; more fundamentally religious; more patriotic about large military spending — all qualities insufficiently explained by the promises and fact of intergenerational class mobility (the famous ‘American Dream’). Instead, as Glaeser specifically argues,

conservative America is explained mostly by a legal-political structure shaped through an 18th century constitution and by the racially heterogeneous nature of American society.

Protecting private property rights and separating state powers, the US Constitution works through a federated structure and majority vote elections. This has many advantages, of course, including enviable political stability, surviving in large measure even a civil war (albeit amended in important ways). Unlike parliamentary systems, however, America's majority voting system, in particular, tends to under-represent minority interests (class and race), which are typically better addressed in parliamentary systems with proportional voting rules in order to assemble practical political coalitions for national governance.

But it is supposedly racial heterogeneity that best explains America's conservative political culture. It is simply easier to engage in redistributive policies, Glaser writes, "where the poor *look* just like everyone else" (ibid., emphasis added). Indeed, as contemporary European societies become more heterogeneous in the wake of demographic and economic changes — as France, Austria and Holland are more populated by trans-national Ghanaians, Moroccans and Turks — conservative political figures like Jean-Marie Le Pen, Joerg Haider, and Pim Fortuyn become more common. They may not be aberrations either. Europe has its own "dark" history, as Mazower (1998, p. 403) has argued: "[European liberal] democracy failed between the wars and if we admit that communism and fascism also formed part of the continent's political heritage then it is hard to deny that what has shaped Europe [...] is a series of violent clashes between antagonistic New Orders."

That said, to return to the core argument against expecting too much from Obama, America's conservative political culture at home has often combined lethally with overseas militarism. During and especially since the end of the Cold War, in particular, the United States has advanced an essentially colonial cartography of power, hardly the basis for anticipating anything 'progressive' anytime soon — if ever. In Gregory's (2003, p. 11) evocative terms, that is, America's overseas militarism, particularly since 9/11, is part of the "present pasts," a contemporary form of colonialism "...with its split geographies of 'us' and 'them,' 'civilization' and 'barbarism,' 'Good' and 'Evil'?" And indeed, as Mark Gillem (2007) notes, American military personnel are now stationed in 140 countries all around the world and have accordingly built a geopolitical archipelago of "America towns" dedicated to similar power-geometries as most all other "empires across time."

The problem with these critically rich if pessimistic arguments, whether applied to domestic or international spaces, is that they are theoretically sophisticated but empirically deficient. For 'Conservative America,' as powerful as it often seems and is, has at moments in time, often after "catastrophe," given way to convulsive periods of significant, progressive societal reform. More than that, we may right now be entering precisely such a period in American history. Obama is not Jean-Marie Le Pen, Joerg Haider, and Pim Fortuyn – nor is his *personally* globalized imaginary of the world's history and geography a Bushian us and them.

These counter-arguments are dealt with in what follows here. That is to say, I develop what I shall call (1) an historical geography of progressive politics, focusing mainly on Lincoln and then four US presidencies in the 20th century. I then (2) explore the possibilities of a 'progressive turn' under Obama, linking the 'man' with the 'moment'. Both these themes, however, require an initial clarification of what is meant by progressive values in the American historical context. Put another way, if there is a well-known Conservative America, the America of George Bush and Sara Palin, there is also a Progressive Other, a 'second country' always struggling to displace the first one, waiting in the wings, fighting (and sometimes winning) against the default history and geography of the usually hegemonic center-right.

3. Excavating America's 'Progressive Other'

Those who expect more from Obama – who conclude that a progressive Obama presidency is, in a word, *possible* — hang their hopes, indeed their audacities, on the future recovery of what are, I argue, four historically intermittent but consequential experiences in the United States. Indeed, these experiences form a kind of broad analytical framework of governance values useful for assessing both past and future histories and geographies (Figure 1).

Stripped to its basics, that is, American progressives, whether the Muckrakers and New Dealers of the past or today's Progressive Democrats of America, for instance, seek to use the power of the state — and therefore the presidency— for purposes of limiting the propensity of large corporations to bend rules their way; for deepening the ideals, practices and geographies of democratic decision-making; and, wherever possible, for facilitating tangible measures of social redistribution from haves to have-nots. Thus contemporary American progressives, for example, oppose the marketization of the social contract (like privatizing

social security) even as they argue for fairer trade rules, wage stabilization, and, finally, for much stronger public protection of civic and environmental commons (soil and air, of course, but also ballot boxes and voting procedures). In 'muckraker' mode, they also seek to expose to public light the vial ground of misused power, ranging from discourses like Barbara Ehrenreich's (2003) 'Nickled and Dimed,' which underscores wealth distribution issues, to Al Gore's 'Inconvenient Truth,' which targets the ultimate global commons (Gore and Guggenheim, 2006).

Figure 1. — American Progressivism

1. Efforts to control and even reverse corporate control over society;
2. Efforts to deepen effective democracy;
3. Efforts to protect the health of both civic and environmental commons;
4. Efforts to redistribute wealth from haves to have-nots.

With respect to contemporary legislation, then, American progressives support, to cite but one recent reform, the Employee Free Choice Act (H.R. 800, S. 1041), which seeks: to establish stronger penalties for violation of employee rights when workers seek to form a union and during first-contract negotiations; to provide mediation and arbitration for first-contract disputes; and to allow employees to form unions by signing cards authorizing union representation (AFL-CIO, 2008). Progressives also support movements like the Apollo Alliance, which is a coalition of business, labor, environmental, and community leaders working to catalyze a clean energy revolution "...to reduce [the] nation's dependence on foreign oil, cut the carbon emissions that are destabilizing [the] climate, and expand opportunities for American businesses and workers" (See <http://apolloalliance.org/about.php>).

Though internationalist, progressives skeptically view overly corporate constructions of globalization — especially where state-negotiated rules for "free markets" are strategically weakened by big business interests, as seen, for instance, in the Financial Services Modernization Act of 1999. In the tumultuous wake of the financial crises on Wall Street in late 2008

— leading to the paradoxical nationalization of key sectors of the American economy — this 1999 Act has come under withering scrutiny, especially from progressives. In particular, concerns now rest with the Clinton-era decision to repeal New Deal-era prohibitions on bundling investment, commercial banking, and insurance services, a regulatory “reform” that some believe led directly to the mortgage meltdown, hedge fund abuses, and the murky growth of derivative markets.

Finally and much most provocatively, progressives are also likely to support military (and other forms of geopolitical) actions (such as sanctions) if the off-shore territorializations of these actions involve the defense of these values.³ This is, to put it mildly, an uncomfortable point for the left, in particular the radical left that has shaped academic discourses of power and US hegemony since the 1960s, a point not lost on Obama and others (“I don’t oppose all wars,” Obama famously stated in 2002 at an anti-war rally).⁴

³American progressives during the 1930s supported FDR’s efforts to drum up existential concern with rising Nazism, fearing the consequences of inaction for democracy, however imperfect; American progressives supported tough sanctions against apartheid South Africa during the 1980s (contra figures like Dick Cheney, who opposed these sanctions); and, more recently, American progressives seek more aggressive efforts to prevent the entirely visible state-sponsored genocide in Darfur. See e.g. <http://www.SaveDarfur.org>.

⁴ In the “Chicago anti-war” speech in 2002 that launched his national career, Obama (2002) said the following:

“I stand before you as someone who is not opposed to war in all circumstances. The Civil War was one of the bloodiest in history, and yet it was only through the crucible of the sword, the sacrifice of multitudes, that we could begin to perfect this union, and drive the scourge of slavery from our soil.

I don’t oppose all wars. [...]

My grandfather signed up for a war the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed, fought in Patton’s army. He saw the dead and dying across the fields of Europe; he heard the stories of fellow troops who first entered Auschwitz and Treblinka. He fought in the name of a larger freedom, part of that arsenal of democracy that triumphed over evil, and he did not fight in vain.

I don’t oppose all wars.

After September 11th, after witnessing the carnage and destruction, the dust and the tears, I supported this Administration’s pledge to hunt down and root out those who would slaughter innocents in the name of intolerance, and I would willingly take up arms myself to prevent such a tragedy from happening again.

I don’t oppose all wars.

For the exercise of off-shore power *per se* is not the main point. Take, for example, Ó Tuathail's (2008, emphases added) recent concerns in the pages of this journal with David Gregory's meta-argument regarding the "colonial present":

...[I]s a structural 'colonial present' *permanently* at work when the United States and its allies use force in international affairs, like the actions that ended ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo? Is it a *structural* feature of US foreign policy irrespective of who occupies the White House (Gregory's analysis of the Clinton administration's foreign policy towards Iraq suggests this)?¹ Does it *overdetermine* the *totality* of foreign policy practices of the US and its allies, like, for example, their position on Darfur? How are we to recognize it *not operating* since othering is easy to find and is indeed a condition of possibility when confronting genocidal regimes?

[...]

¹On page 175 Gregory quotes Madeleine Albright's response to a report that over 500,000 Iraqi children had died as a result of sanctions: "We think it was worth it." This is an *ambush quote* and provides no allowance for context. Under the sign 'the colonial present' it renders one of the more progressive minded US foreign policy officials of recent years as equivalent to some of the most reactionary and conservative.

A radical interpretation of US power would answer Ó Tuathail's questions mostly in the affirmative. From this perspective, US political history always works against anything more than mildly interesting; it is simply impossible to expect more, because the office itself, philosophically *liberal* in constitutional design, structurally prevents real progress (radicals don't run for the US presidency, in other words, despite what Fox News

And I know that in this crowd today, there is no shortage of patriots, or of patriotism. What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war. What I am opposed to is the cynical attempt by [...] weekend warriors [...] to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and in hardships borne. What I am opposed to is the attempt by political hacks [...] to distract us from a rise in the uninsured, a rise in the poverty rate, a drop in the median income—to distract us from corporate scandals and a stock market that has just gone through the worst month since the Great Depression. That's what I'm opposed to. A dumb war. A rash war. A war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics." It is interesting to compare the logic of this speech with Lincoln's detailed opposition to the Mexican-American War as a junior Illinois politician in January, 1848.

might seek to communicate; they do sometimes work as community organizers, though, especially in racially-coded “urban” areas).

But if the “colonial present” is *not* a “structural feature” that “overdetermines” the agency of all political talent, what can Obama accomplish? Futurology is a risky business. Truth be told, Obama may not turn out so well; he may disappoint; he may badly underperform; he may seek “unity” and “conciliation” at the expense of the more progressive goals at issue here. But even a cursory review of previous periods of American history suggests – I now argue -- that at least plausible past efforts to control corporations, deepen democracy, protect commons, and redistribute wealth do mark at least parts of the presidencies of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lyndon Baines Johnson (McPherson, 1991; Blum, 1982) — if, alas, no one since LBJ. Accordingly there is, as Van Wyk Brooks once put it, a “usable past” to draw on, an empirical, cultural and political reservoir of practical experiences (or values) to suggest at least the possibility of alternative progressive futures (Blake, 1999). Moreover, when combined with the Bush catastrophe, Obama has an opening.

4. Past as prologue

Catastrophe – a “disastrous” US presidency, for instance – does not inexorably give rise to progressive change, however debated, to conflate the Benjamin and Fukuyama head-quotes at the start of this paper. Catastrophe can (indeed often does) lead to xenophobia, resentment, rage, fear – the basest elements of the human experience that feed political conflagrations as varied as KKK cross-burnings and HUAC witch hunts. But at important, indeed utterly *crucial* moments in American history, various kinds of “catastrophe” have also led to what can only be described as progressive (if not radical) change.⁵

Consider only the most far-reaching crisis, the American Civil War. In the middle of this crisis, Abraham Lincoln *progressively* redefined the entire meaning of the country, arguing, in his 1863 Gettysburg Address, for “a new birth of freedom” (Wills, 1992). This extended not only the famous Emancipation Proclamation of 1862 but also the re-territorialization of political identity, from state to nation, from “these United States are” to “the United States is,” the latter grammatically

⁵ Though H.W. Brands, in his recent biography of FDR, calls him a “radical” president, his analysis comports more with my definition of American progressivism. See Brand (2008).

incorrect but politically novel – a ‘second American revolution,’ as James Patterson (1991) suggests. Lincoln *deepened* effective democracy, then, by scaling it upwards, even as later generations worked daily against this re-territorialization of political identity through constant calls for states’ rights and the pernicious and horrific re-construction of Jim Crow power (leaving later presidents to ignore or avoid race and space, like Wilson and FDR, or to take them on, like LBJ).

Though constitutional codification helps ideas to survive in time and across space, to become “durable” as actor-network theorists might argue, Plessey vs Fergusson in 1896 (and other racial legislation, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act) reversed course; precarious political rights were severely abridged, not least of course in the Jim Crow South. Lincoln’s efforts were indirectly also smothered by the corporatization of the late 19th century – by the unbridled economics of Conservative America. Thus, economic (labor) rights were abused – as well as the existential rights of non-humans (Bison, trees, rivers) to literally survive the worst excesses of human avarice and greed. By the time Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner coined the term “Guided Age” in 1873, the American state was a primary conduit for capital, for robber barons and industrial tycoons — a “banker’s Olympus,” as Henry Adams acidly wrote, where simply making money motivated “a restless, pushing, energetic, ingenious [populace,] always awake and trying to get ahead of [the] neighbors” (Garraty, 1968, p. 2).

But even as we might accept a relational theory of the state, other forces besides barons and tycoons were always present. By 1900 the Gilded Age gave way to the first Progressive Era of the new century, a “turn” political economists can explain by referencing the contradictions of capital, but that can also be explained by tracing the variegated impacts on the state of multiple agents, from Muckrakers to Methodists, from city planners to social workers, from labor unions to agrarian populists. For ‘antisocial individualism’ was increasingly critiqued, including by businessmen who founded the American Economics Association, which was dedicated to the proposition that “government regulation of the economy is one of ‘the indispensable conditions of human progress’” (ibid., p. 28).

Within this context, the Republican Party of New York “dumped” their gubernatorial reformer, Theodore Roosevelt, into the (then) no-man’s land of the vice-presidency, where he could play a (quieter) second fiddle to William McKinley. For Roosevelt as governor of New York was, in their view, too active in regulating corporate America, too solicitous of the muckrakers’ pen, too fundamentally concerned that, as John Morton Blum

(1983, p. 26) argues, “the [US] states could not satisfactorily discipline the activities of large national corporations.” When he became president after McKinley’s assassination, then, he directed considerable fire at what the economic historian, Ellis Hawley, has called, within the context of the New Deal, “the problem of monopoly.” Eventually this would also include very strong support for labor unions.

Roosevelt furthermore established the core progressive grammar of the New Freedom, the New Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society in his initial effort to offer the public a “Square Deal,” wherein federal regulations would ensure equitable railroad rates and, in a time of Sinclair Lewis’s infamous revelations in *The Jungle*, the safety of foods and drugs. Roosevelt set out to halt: the setting of unfair prices, the marketing of shabby goods; and “the dominating of activities [by larger corporations] that were properly the responsibility of the whole people and their political representatives” (Blum, 1982, p. 30).

Remarkably, he also called for universal health care and, as the Progressive Party’s presidential candidate for office in 1912, national health insurance; perhaps most importantly in regard to his longest-lasting historical legacy, Roosevelt drew sustained attention and directed early resources to the fragility of the country’s ecological commons, particularly as these involved the path-breaking creation of national parks, forest reserves, reclamation schemes, and conservation initiatives (Hays, 1959). Rejecting the radical industrial (rather than craft) unionism of the Wobblies, who called for “workplace democracy” and the abolition of wages in 1905, Roosevelt nonetheless “broke with the doctrine of *laissez-faire*,” recognizing, *contra* the puritanical Milton Friedman (1962) many years later, that “sheer liberalism...could no longer serve as the basis for a society that had grown rich and complex” (Blum, 1982, p. 30).

Woodrow Wilson, the first Southern-born politician to hold the presidency since 1865 when he was elected in 1912, carried on with many of Roosevelt’s initiatives. Arguably the leading academic political scientist of his day, Wilson actually developed a loose theory of progressivism, eventually dubbed while president the “New Freedom,” which further deepened the state’s anti-trust powers, more rigorously oversaw the public regulation of private trade, and, most interestingly, directly informed the construction of the modern Federal Reserve System (Heckscher, 1991, pp. 318-21).

Although this new system failed to assuage agrarian populists, led by William Jennings Bryan, it did try to curtail the power of Wall Street capital in two ways: first, through the ‘architecture’ of the system, which

tempered through a new structure of regulation the power of the largest (Eastern) banks by instituting public oversight through federal appointments nominated by the President and confirmed by the Congress; and second, through the new, more decentralized geography of the system, which created twelve reserve districts, in large part to diffuse the hegemony of Wall Street finance. Structurally, the system sought to modernize and rationalize American capitalism — to avoid the (long forgotten) “panic of 1907” and other experiences with market turbulence. Socially, it had the latent potential, as Blum (1982, p. 70) writes, “to use the Federal government to reform the conditions of credit that favored the wealthy and penalized small businessmen and rural folk.”⁶

World War I, though it led to adoption of a progressive federal income tax at home, interrupted the social rather than structural potential of these new efforts to control corporate control over society, to occasion and deepen a new territoriality of US political economy. With the “return to normalcy” signaled by the twin elections of the incompetent, empty-headed Warren G Harding and the lethargic, distracted Calvin Coolidge, the hard work of social progressivism — along the lines outlined earlier in this paper -- only returned to the national surface after the stock market collapse of 1929 and, of course, the arrival of the worst economic catastrophe in US history: the Great Depression.

Herbert Hoover, after a laissez-faire start, eventually moved leftward (if not to the left), most notably in setting up the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (which FDR later merged with the FDIC). But it would of course fall mostly to FDR after 1932 to fundamentally shift away from conservative nostrums of political economy. While it is today easy to critique the New Deal’s legislative limitations and political failures, particularly around race and democracy, FDR’s 1943 synopsis of his early accomplishments nonetheless remains impressive all these decades later. Using the folksy metaphor of bodily sickness, FDR noted that he simply called up “Old Doctor New Deal” to prescribe then largely untested remedies:

He saved the banks of the United States and set up a sound banking system. One of the old doctor’s remedies was Federal Deposit Insurance to guarantee bank deposits. Another remedy was saving homes from

⁶ As Heckscher (1991: 318) concludes: “The bill establishing the Federal Reserve System changed in the course of its passage from one under which the banking community exercised control over the nation’s credit to one that put large powers in government.”

foreclosure, through the H.O.L.C.; saving farms from foreclosure by the Farm Credit Administration; rescuing agriculture from disaster through the Triple A and Soil Conservation; protecting stock investors through the S.E.C. (cited in Smith, 2007. p. 601-2)

And there was also what William Leuchtenburg (1963) later called the Rooseveltian “reconstruction”: viz., the Social Security Act in 1935; unemployment insurance; aid to the handicapped and infirm; minimum-wage and maximum hours legislation; abolition of child labor; rural electrification; flood control; the Tennessee Valley Authority; Rexford Tugwell’s Resettlement Administration; the Civilian Conservation Corps; the Works Progress Administration; the federal protection of collective bargaining and the right to strike through the Wagner Labor Act, also passed in 1935; and arts, culture and youth development.

The New Deal in all this forever changed the historical direction of American society, much to the chagrin of the economic right, in particular, who tried to reverse the New Deal almost from its origins in the “100 Days” of 1933. But in activating all these new forms of public agency, FDR also decisively and permanently shifted the *geographical anatomy* of American society. With respect to the institutional spatialities of power, for instance, the *territoriality* of the state deepened; a new “state presence” emerged within unregulated (or under-regulated) domains, particularly the national economy, in general, and the spaces of the firm, in particular. But new material geographies also appeared, including a fresh layer of civic spaces designed to serve public functions – from libraries and court houses to airports, bridges, urban infrastructure, dams, and environmental and rural amenities – a collective social achievement in locating and building up a new “commons” that greatly amplified the progressive impulses of earlier periods (e.g. the City Beautiful Movement).

FDR thus provided the model for LBJ’s ‘Great Society’ program in the 1960s, widely regarded as the next major phase in progressive politics. Indeed, Shesol’s (1997, p. 235, emphasis added) summation of LBJ’s effort is unequivocal, placing him within the context of “postwar liberal ideology”:

In 1964, voters had given Johnson an unprecedented mandate and an enormous congressional majority....The result was the most incredible profusion of legislation in the history of the republic. The breadth of Johnson’s agenda was staggering, as was his ambition – to fulfill the legacy of the New Deal and then to outdo it, to do more good for more people than Roosevelt or any other president ever had.

According to Doris Kearns Goodwin, the specifics of this agenda were demonstrably progressive:

Medicare for the old, educational assistance for the young, tax rebates for business, a higher minimum wage for labor, subsidies for farmers, vocational training for the unskilled, food for the hungry, housing for the homeless, poverty grants for the poor, improving schooling for the Indians, rehabilitation for the lame, higher benefits for the unemployed, reduced quotas for the immigrants, auto safety for drivers, pensions for the retired, fair labeling for consumers, conservations for the hikers and the campers, and more and more and more (cited in Shesel, 1997, p. 235).

The United States has not experienced a national progressive era in over forty years. In part this arguably reflects the intellectual and practical hegemony of neoliberalism. For his part, then, Bill Clinton – the only Democrat since FDR actually elected more than once – failed to match the progressive legislation achieved by his predecessors. Indeed, in key ways, Clinton dialed back on these achievements. To be sure, in his 1998 federal budget, for example, Clinton did increase investment in education and training to \$51 billion, a 20% rise in this area. These investments provided, amongst other things, increased scholarships for low-income students and more resources for “America Reads”, a childhood literacy program (both traditionally progressive approaches); but Clinton veiled all of this in traditionally “conservative” verbiage: education was now, in actual fact, a key national security issue.

More significantly, declaring the era of Big Government “over,” Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Amongst other things, TANF removed the entitlement for families with incomes below a certain level to receive, effectively, ongoing financial assistance from the federal government. Instead, TANF-eligible households were now expected to take personal responsibility for their own economic futures. Most state-level bureaucracies, charged with administering welfare programs in complex partnership with the federal government, subsequently threatened “strict consequences” for those TANF-eligible households who failed to pursue employment.

But has the tide turned once again? Has catastrophe provided new ground for progressive politics? Can we expect more than Clintonism?

5. A emerging progressive turn?

Since 2004 or so, progressives in the United States have sensed the gathering possibility of a new progressive movement (Hayden et al, 2008; Young, 2008). In one of the notable recent contributions, for example, Jeff Faux, writing for *The Nation*, asked (before the Wall Street crisis in September, 2008): “Is this the Big One?” The last Big One, the Great Depression of the 1930s, was of course one of the most consequential crises in American history, perhaps falling only short of the Civil War (McPherson, 1991) and the opening years of the republic (McCullough, 2008). In Faux’s view, Americans have been living for too long on an “economic San Andres fault,” using borrowed money from foreigners to sustain consumption levels that mask what he calls the country’s “fractured competitiveness.”

Americans now live in metropolitan areas – and metropolitan areas are mostly made up of single family houses, which are basically geographical engines for economic consumption. “The blowback of recent housing deflation on our massively overleveraged financial markets has,” in Faux’s analysis, “severely restricted the flow of credit – the lifeblood of the world’s largest debtor economy.” Houses have not only driven the consumption of “stuff,” then, they have allowed most households to compensate for long-stagnant wages by accessing mortgage equity and by distracting them from perhaps the most important fact of all. Simply stated: America is economically more *unequal* than at any time since 1928, the last year before the last Big One.

Americans now live, that is, in a new Gilded Age, where the richest 1 percent of the population “...currently holds wealth worth \$16.8 trillion, nearly \$2 trillion more than the bottom 90 percent” (Cavanaugh and Collins, 2008; cf. Thompson, 2008; Henwood, 2008). In fact, according to the Institute for Policy Studies Program on Inequality and the Common Good, in 1980 families in the bottom 90 percent of American society averaged \$30,446 in income, about \$74 more than they did in 2006 when adjusted for inflation. In contrast, the top one percent in 1980 took home less than one-fifth the average income of the top one percent in 2006 (see www.thenation.com/doc/20080630/income_inequality).

While most economists tend to point to the (post-Fordist) impacts of globalization and technology for this state of affairs, as even a casual reading of *The Economist* reveals, another reading focuses instead on the role of *political power*:

Over the past three decades, market-worship politicians and their corporate backers have engineered the most colossal redistribution of wealth in modern world history, a redistribution from the bottom up, from working people to a tiny global elite (Cavanaugh and Collins, 2008).

Even as famous newspapers are cutting staff, then, the *Wall Street Journal* somehow still has a fulltime reporter dedicated to covering “Richistan,” this Big Rich Country within the country (ibid.).

While ethical and moral objections might be reasonably raised to this recent project in socio-political “engineering,” the immediate historical dangers are fundamentally economic. As Cavanaugh and Collins further note:

The concentration of financial resources at the top of the economic ladder has left average families with too little income to keep the “real” economy — the production and distribution of goods for everyday use — strong and vibrant. With household debt at its highest since 1933, families simply can’t maintain their former levels of purchasing. Meanwhile, rich investors, unable to find high rates of return in the real economy, have turned [US] financial markets into speculate casinos where few rules apply (ibid.).

The natural corollary— and the events of September, 2008 provide plausible evidence for this analysis -- is the idea that something has eventually got to give, that a (post-neo-liberal?) progressive era really is in the cards (Henwood, 2008).

Unsurprisingly, the US left is convinced this development is imminent. In 2004, for example, *Harpers* gathered a forum of leading public intellectuals — Ron Daniels, Eric Foner, Ralph Nader, Kevin Phillips, Francis Fox Piven and Lewis Lapham — to discuss the outlines of a new progressive movement (Harpers, 2004). Foner argued that “...on many of the most important issues, there is [now] in fact a progressive majority in the polls. More than half of Americans believes that the federal government is doing too little to safeguard to environment. More than half oppose waging preemptive wars. Almost four-fifths believe that it would be worth raising taxes to provide universal health care” (p. 32).

Piven similarly added that “...most government programs have broad support. Environmental regulation, Social Security, Medicare — all these are very popular” (p. 33). In 2007, Rick Perlstein similarly laid out the *statistical* case for an “emerging progressive majority,” drawing extensively on longitudinal (1987-2007) data by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press. In particular, Pearlstein noted that “...independents are [now] thinking [more] like Democrats, and fewer and

fewer want much to do with the Republican Party” (p. 14; see also Wallace-Wells, 2008). Even the so-called evangelical vote may be, if not radically changing, then morphing into more complex and politically malleable forms.⁷

All this would be too easy to dismiss as lefty day-dreaming if conservative intellectuals did not also sense an approaching shift in the political landscape, perhaps even a tectonic rupture. David Brooks (2008), the conservative columnist for the *NY Times*, wrote in the summer of 2008 of “the coming activist age,” though he argued someone like McCain, legislating in the tradition of Teddy Roosevelt, would be more likely to succeed than someone like Obama, legislating in the tradition of TR’s cousin, FDR (whom Brooks ignores).

Still, Brooks believes “Americans are entering an era of epic legislation” reckoning that “five large problems” will require “gigantic” government activism. These are: the erosion of the social contract, in particular the ill-provision of health care; the energy crisis; the stagnation in human capital since 1970, a major cause (and effect) of the income inequality just discussed; significant reform of financial markets, including the loose controls on sub-prime lending and other forms of business regulation; and finally, an issue that has received surprisingly little attention, a new national infrastructure agenda, especially as this relates to the US transportation system, which Brooks calls “in shambles.”

The liberal (if not overtly progressive) commentariat is just now catching up. As Howard Fineman (2008) recently noted:

The era of cowboy capitalism has died, largely of self-inflicted wounds. Who knows what’s coming now? I do: A new era of tight business regulation and government intervention in the markets.

The “times” may already be here, or least “here” in some national spaces. Interestingly, New Zealand, a pioneer of the welfare state and, during the 1980s, the “first social democratic government to embrace a

⁷ As Fitzgerald reports (2008. p. 29) “According to polls taken in the last four years, half of all evangelicals have substantial differences with the religious right. [... Moreover,] Sun Belt evangelicalism is very different from that of the old Bible Belt: suburban families trying to get their kids into college don’t believe the earth is only a few thousand years old....” While most young evangelicals consider themselves conservative on personal morality, most also hold largely liberal on issues such as gays rights, health care, poverty, the environment, and major policy challenges like the War in Iraq.

free-market program of wholesale privatisation, liberalisation and deregulation,” seems to be on the cutting edge of yet another political era (Milne, 2008). Specifically, the coalition government under Helen Clark has, for example, renationalized rail and ferry services, which were privatized and asset-stripped by Australian investors in the 1990s. As Milne (2008) reports: New Zealand has learned the “painful” lessons of privatization and has started to refocus on the role of the *state* in rebuilding a modern, environmentally sustainable transport network as part and parcel of the country’s 21st-century economic infrastructure.

Will the US follow? The raw material for a progressive presidency is probably lying around, though the deficits George W. Bush has left will severely test any new efforts to promote policies which require new social investment. Still, if conservatives have found the responsibility of governance “discomfiting,” as George Will (2006) has observed, it seems unlikely that a post-neo-liberal, even activist era will be particularly friendly ground for the Republican Party unless, of course, the political imagination of the GOP turns its back on 40 years of conservative ideology, tapping into the older, activist reformism of TR and before that Lincoln. That is possible, though it seems more likely that the “five large problems” Brooks highlights will require a party less genetically “discomfited” with actual governance.⁸

For better and for worse, that is the Democratic Party, which in the past several decades has often been unworthy of office and, when in office, more than tepid to progressive legislation in the second American tradition just outlined above. Generously, of course, this tepid diagnosis is plausibly explained the conservative hammerlock that has utterly dominates American politics since 1980 or so. Regardless, if political history has patterns or rhythms even remotely parallel to forty-year Kondratiev waves or Shumpertarian cycles, then these conservative times may have, indeed, finally run their course.

⁸That John McCain could actually win the nomination of the Republican Party may well suggests the historical limits of the GOP’s “social” turn; social conservatives, especially self-identified evangelicals, were strong enough to end (the Mormon) Mitt Romney’s “economic” candidacy, for example, but not nearly strong enough to propel (the Baptist) Mike Huckabee’s “pastoral” agenda past Iowa, resulting in nostalgia for Ronald Reagan reminiscent of liberals’ perennial search for the next FDR. In fact, in his book, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind*, Jeffrey Hart questions the very ideological soul of evangelicalism, pointed to its “populist” roots in camp revivals and arguing, in turn, that “populism is never conservative, except by accident” (quoted in Will, 2006).

6. Mapping Obamas...and the progressive moment

How easy is it, though, to imagine a (progressive) man and a (progressive) moment coming together?

On the one hand, it is not easy at all (MacFarquhar, 2007). Like FDR, who ran for office in 1932 on a balanced budget platform, Obama rather predictably has tacked to the ideological center since tying up his party's nomination: viz., his community-oriented appeal to faith-based initiatives (Fitzgerald, 2008); his cosines with economic and financial figures such as Jason Furman, a defender of Wall-Mart, and Robert Rubin, who talked Bill Clinton, for instance, out of pro-labor and environmental reforms to NAFTA (Klein, 2008); his decision to support arguably regressive reforms to FICA (the Federal Insurance Contributions Act), raising payroll taxes in a manner, according to some, that compensates for income tax cuts by and for the wealthiest classes.

So far, moreover, Obama has not really rejected America's "imperial posture," even though his Berlin speech substantially softened that posture through comfortable talk of "multilateralism." His position on Afghanistan remains dangerously vague, though his continued *involvement* in Afghanistan per se, following the earlier analysis of this paper, does not inexorably mean imply an imperial, regressive, "colonial present" foreign policy. In addition, as Christopher Hayes (2008) has lamented, Obama has failed to point out that "...America's suburbs and car culture are not sustainable modes of living in an era of expensive oil and global warming," one of the key sources of threat to our ecological commons.

On the other hand, Barack Obama springs directly out of the heart of the Democratic Party's post-1960s power structure: the economic and social left. His troubles with working class voters in the Democratic primaries, especially in "border states" like Kentucky and West Virginia (i.e. culturally southern regions with few blacks), highlighted not simply the perennial problem that cultural (rather than economic) progressives are maligned as "elitists," only one step removed from being "rootless cosmopolitans" (Alterman, 2008). More to the point, Obama, as a black man, is potentially seen by some working class voters as a minority elitist. More than that, he is a *Northerner who ran with another Northerner*. Obama's decisive victory last November, particularly in Southern states like Virginia, was therefore utterly remarkable on many political fronts. That he really pulled this off, in the face of all these past problems with other Democratic figures, does suggest that he may represent something

more than the usual political turn. He may be that one rare talent that comes along every several decades to reshape progressive politics.

But even if he is, if the past is any guide, his achievements will be uneven and at times extremely difficult for progressives to support, who will not get all they want from him. Consider, for instance what was left out in the earlier review of past presidencies. Theodore Roosevelt, progressive at home, was an aggressive, odious imperialist abroad — the man with the Big Stick; neither Woodrow Wilson nor FDR, both of whom needed Jim Crow Democrats to pass their progressive reforms, did anything remotely progressive on race and democracy, certainly nothing as bold as Lincoln or LBJ. FDR, for instance, refused to support anti-lynching legislation, arguably his most feckless moment in office.

Since FDR's string of four consecutive victories, moreover, only one northern Democratic has actually won the presidency: John Kennedy. And playing up an entirely mythical missile gap with the USSR, JFK was not that progressive; an aggressive cold warrior he derided the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, and he moved with caution on civil rights issues. LBJ, brave on race and the effective deepening of democracy and redistribution this entailed, nonetheless found his dream of a poverty-free, racially just "Great Society" buried in the imperial fields of Vietnam, often derided by the very same people he was trying to help. Past progressives, then, are past imperfect.

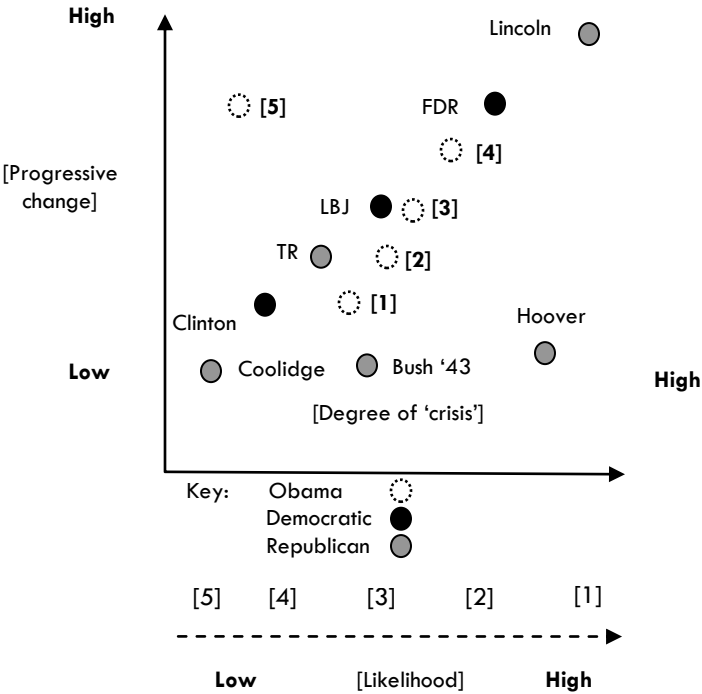
One way to interpret what might happen to Obama, then, is to hypothesize five alternative "futures" for his presidency. This is done in Figure 2 below, which maps five alternative possibilities in the analytical context of the historical geography of progressive presidencies just outlined.

Following the first scenario, Obama's enters an historical moment marked by greater socio-economic crisis than, for example, that which confronted President Clinton and on par with previous progressives. Specifically, it amounts to a post-conservative period in time — a new ideological opening -- wherein a majority of the public expects federal action on big problems like over-corporatization, democracy, the commons and redistribution. Under the first scenario [1], though, Obama under-performs as a progressive, accomplishing about the same amount of "change" as did Clinton (who was limited by historical circumstances as well as his own personal failures, see e.g. Stephanopoulos, 1999).

Under the second scenario [2], Obama accomplishes more than did Clinton, in part because greater historical crisis provides more

“opportunity” to do so but also because, in political terms, Obama over-performs politically, finding a way to build and maintain a more progressive coalition on key policy issues related to the progressive values discussed in this paper. The most likely metric for concretely assessing his progressive accomplishments under scenario 2 would be if he signed some form of national health care legislation, though his ability to end the war in Iraq would also figure highly (both of which would imply geographical changes at multiple scales).

Figure 2. — Five ‘futures’ for Obama in historical context



However, unless we really are on the precipice of the next “Big One” – something like the Great Depression -- it is unlikely that Obama will be able to accomplish anywhere near as much as did FDR in the 1930s [4],

even as an unnerving, steady stream of influential observers are starting to draw socio-economic links to the 1930s, including, most notably, Paul Krugman. Contrarily, it seems virtually impossible to imagine perhaps every progressive's obvious preference: a meaningful progressive agenda – on corporate reform; on democracy; on protecting the commons; on redistribution -- without painful historical crisis [5].

A bit more likely, perhaps, though still difficult to imagine at the time of writing, is that Obama might be able to approach LBJ's domestic agenda [3] yet also exceed his tragically unprogressive record on foreign policy (Obama for America, 2008b). This would invariably include tangible and sustained progress, for example, on everything from health care reform to greater tax fairness; from initiating a new "green grid" for the country's energy future; to facilitating, as he states in his urban policy agenda, greater federal support for the so-called New Regionalism, wherein the country's metropolitan economies engage in a fresh round of federally-supported metro-politics directed at demonstrably more progressive goals. Part and parcel is this agenda is, for instance, Obama's interest in supporting regional innovation clusters; increased access to capital for underserved businesses; smart growth transit; and the greening up of manufacturing and core urban infrastructure (see e.g. Obama for America, 2008a).

7. Conclusions: on hope and experience

Samuel Johnston once quipped that a second marriage is "the triumph of hope over experience." So too with politics, in America as elsewhere, and particularly with progressive politics. For politicians peddling feel-good futures come and go and, more often than not, gravely disappoint. Exceptional figures who also just happen to become politicians – such as Nelson Mandela – tend to prove the exception rather than the rule. Obama's romantic, seductive and mostly vague rhetoric of hope – "the audacity of hope" – and change – "change we can believe in" – thus demands us to confront the unromantic coalface of historical experiences, where previous marriages for progress have faltered.

In America, historical experiences are typically shaped by a conservative political culture built on a frontier liberalism that, in most times and places, falls well short of the progressive's political agenda, once again, to limit corporate control over society; to deepen effective democracy; to protect civic and environmental commons; and to redistribute wealth from haves to have-nots, sometimes directly, sometimes

indirectly. On occasion, though, as this paper has tried to argue throughout, progressives occupy center stage – often in response to catastrophic conditions that, as Walter Benjamin notes, provide the very ground from when progressive histories of the future – alternatives to Conservative America -- can grow and flourish in time and across space.

Can Obama help occasion new spaces in a new progressive future? Yes, he can, if the man and the moment flow together in the right way. In terms of his own agency, which he obviously can control, Obama will need to rely on the power of presidential words, on the capacity to frame possibilities around emotional aspirations? Is this possible? Yes, as the evidence of his power to shape national politics through well-crafted words is already rather impressive. Rather than simply state, for instance, that global warming is a problem we must fix, Obama speaks of “healing the Earth” and “arresting the rise of the oceans,” elegant, elegiac language that has the cadence, spirit and content of a civic sermon, aligning his political prose more with Abraham Lincoln and William Jennings Bryan than with Harry Truman or, more recently, Bill Clinton. Indeed, this is a central part of Obama’s potential power: he simply does not speak (or write) like most other politicians (see e.g. Obama, 2002, 2004 [1995], 2008a, 2008b, 2008c).

Is he smart enough? Again, yes. Obama’s intellectual acumen, which he shares with the professorial Wilson, is well-documented; but will also have to be alloyed more with an (as yet unproven) LBJ-like prowess in the country’s legislative chambers. Moreover, his “first-class temperament,” will have to serve his judgment as well as it served FDR in the 1930s, for whom this felicitous phrase was first applied.

And Obama also has challenges no other president has ever faced, all of whom were white. A black man – the nation’s first in this office – he simply cannot be seen to be “angry” or somehow “dangerous” by a white majority; this is perhaps why Obama studiously avoids the “class welfare” rhetoric of, for example, an old patrician like FDR, who frequently lambasted with great zeal the “titans of commerce and industry” and “economic royalists.” That said, Obama is fully capable of striking progressive chords (Chavez, 2008). In his acceptance speech in Denver, for example, he laid out a rather didactic critique of trickle-down economics (and the wider neoliberal philosophies of governance that justify these economics) that should give American progressives considerable hope that change really has arrived:

For over two decades -- for over two decades, [McCain has] subscribed to that old, discredited Republican philosophy: Give more and more to those with the most and hope that prosperity trickles down to everyone else. In Washington, they call this the "Ownership Society," but what it really means is that you're on your own. Out of work? Tough luck, you're on your own. No health care? The market will fix it. You're on your own. Born into poverty? Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, even if you don't have boots. You are on your own (Obama, 2008e).

Naturally, huge "structural" realities will heavily condition the final potential of Obama's still-forming progressive philosophy and presidential agency. But structures per se are not procrustean beds into which all future histories are forced. Agency matters. For structures -- economic, cultural, even psychological -- ebb and flow with agency; the possibility that a moment has "arrived" for progressive national politics therefore means that Obama has an opportunity to shift the territorialities of the American political economy (Cockburn, 2008). Progressives might usefully gauge these efforts not only in terms set out in this paper, but also in terms of what past progressives have *and have not* accomplished. Americans may be on the verge of re-discovering their "other" history, the history where progressive politics are not simply located *outside* the state -- but that animates its very center: the presidency itself. And Barack Hussein Obama, elected in a landslide by nearly 65 million Americans, may well be the main reason why.

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