

BIRTE CHRIST  
GRETA OLSON Editors

# Obama and the Paradigm Shift **Measuring Change**

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GERHARD HOFFMANN  
ALFRED HORNUNG





# Obama

## and the Paradigm Shift

### Measuring Change

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*For Thomas C. Holt and Leora Auslander,  
building bridges*



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Birte Christ and Greta Olson





# Contents

GRETA OLSON

Introduction:

What Has the Obama Presidency Changed? 11

THOMAS C. HOLT

Reflections on the Problem of Race in the Age of Obama 35

M. MICHAELA HAMPF

The Right to Bare Arms:

Reading Michelle Obama's Public Image 55

GABRIELE DIETZE

Barack Obama's "Identity Performance"

and the Intersection of Race and Gender

during the Nomination Battle against Hillary Clinton 81

GRETA OLSON

Weighing In on Obama:

Connections between Embodiment, Class,  
and Masculinity in the United States and Germany 105

ANDREAS FALKE

Obama and Paradigm Change?

No Way to Escape the Political Divide 141

BIRTE CHRIST

Michelle Obama, the Good American and Icon of  
Global Power Femininity:

Gender Politics and National Boundary-Making in  
German News Coverage 167

HELEN BOND	
Shattering Ceilings Worldwide: Obama's Presidency and Its Impact on the Identity and Political Consciousness of Children in the United States, Sierra Leone, China, Russia, and Jamaica	197
MICHAEL BUTTER	
The Birthers' New World Order: Conspiracy Theories about Barack Obama	225
JÖRN AHRENS	
Images of the Political: Obama and Post-Democracy	247
SABINE SIELKE	
The Poetics of Presidency and the Promises of Change: Reading Barack Obama	267
ALLYSON HOBBS	
Conclusion: A Paradigm Shift in Fits and Starts	287
List of Contributors	297

GRETA OLSON

## Introduction: What Has the Obama Presidency Changed?

This book asks if Barack Obama's election as the 44th President of the United States represented a paradigmatic shift in the political and cultural tides. It works to move beyond a renewed acknowledgement of the extraordinary symbolic value of a black man having become president in a country that is still rife with racial problems and only granted African Americans the vote in 1965. While taking note of this moment, it asks what changes this presidency has brought with it beyond the symbolic. This volume does not aim to represent a final assessment of the achievements and disappointments of the Obama presidency from 2008 to 2012, as a number of recent publications do.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the editors believe that whatever the outcome of the November 2012 presidential election, the Obama presidency has had a lasting, profound effect on US American as well as on transnational cultural politics.

In this, *Obama and the Paradigm Shift—Measuring Change* takes issue with the thesis that September 11th and its consequences represented a paradigm alteration of American culture and foreign policy. "Paradigm shift" is used here not in the Kuhnian sense to mean the replacement of one set of epistemological assumptions with another. Rather, the term is used with reference to the George W. Bush administration's frequent attestation that the September 2001 attacks legitimated the nation's supra legal actions toward terrorist suspects and unilateral military actions ("Memo"). A decade after the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, commentators now increasingly stress the continuity of longstanding American political traditions rather than change. In a legacy of the Cold War era, the policies of the Bush administration are viewed as having perpetuated late twentieth-century American political policies rather than changing them. Moreover, already present

<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Dorrien, Edwards, Fallows, and Lizza.

social and political divisions within America itself are now argued to have not been substantially altered by the attacks on September 11, 2001 (Peterson and Pollack; Butter and Keller; Butter et al.; Greiner).

In a counter position, *Obama and the Paradigm Shift* questions whether the Obama presidency has constituted a fundamental shift in cultural politics. It notes commentators who identify other twenty-first century events as triggers of substantive shifts in America's cultural ground waters. Amongst the events that have been mentioned as paradigm shattering are Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the continuing, first American and then global, financial crisis that began in 2008. Yet what is most frequently named as the most important event in twenty-first century American cultural politics is Barack Obama's election. Obama's electoral campaign and election have been termed a seismic shift in American political culture (White) and the beginning of a new era (Campbell).

This collection queries the degree to which the presidency and the election have led to cultural change with a decidedly transnational perspective as it looks at the presidency's impact on the political and cultural landscape in the US as well as Germany. Thus our emphasis is not only on whether the paradigm of American cultural politics has been altered, but, if so, to what degree. This notion of measuring or taking stock appears appropriate as we near the end of the first administrative period. The initial Obamaphoria or Obamamania of 2008 has abated. We have witnessed the "shellacking" that the president and his party received in the midterm elections ("Obama"). We have lived through a brief re-peeking of presidential popularity after the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, and then a summer of Obama blaming as the debt ceiling conflict came to a crisis at the end of July 2011. At the time of this writing, Obama faces reelection: He is alternately described as weakened and too conciliatory or as more partisan and aggressive in his campaigning and governing style (Lizza 49; "No More" 59).

*Obama and the Paradigm Shift* asks how the actuality of real change in key areas of political culture has measured up to the desire for and promise of the new that marked his election rhetoric. Specifically, *Obama and the Paradigm Shift* investigates those areas of cultural politics in which Obama's election to the US presidency were expected to make the greatest impact. Within the American context, these include racial politics, normative forms of masculinity and femininity, and an

abatement of the general divisiveness of the political climate. Outside of the United States, the volume questions the degree to which these phenomena have had an effect on related areas within German culture.

One way to initially address the thesis that the presidency amounts to a paradigm shift is to name those areas in which the election itself was thought to have brought about the most important changes in the political landscape. These issues are reflected on in the images and headlines that followed the election. The January 26, 2009 cover of *The New Yorker* featured Drew Friedman's iconic portrait of Obama wearing a wig in the pose of George Washington's portrait on the dollar bill.

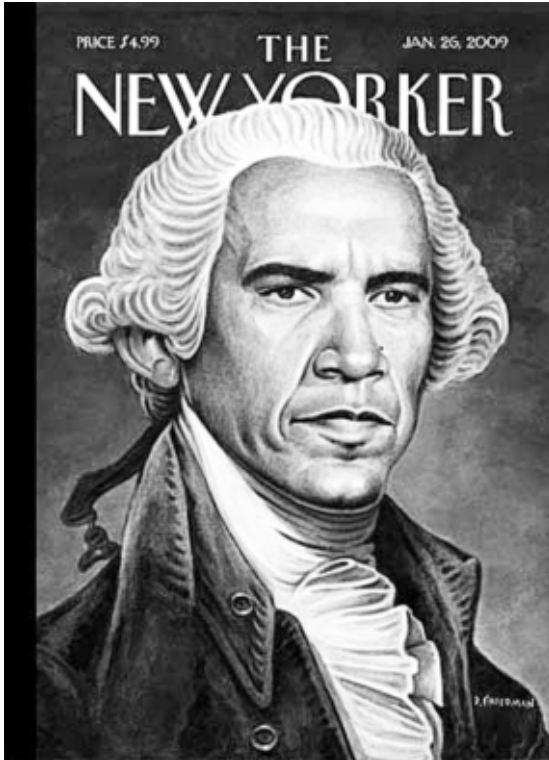


Fig. 1: Drew Friedman, “The First” (2009)

© Drew Friedman

Entitled “The First,” the portrait plays on the symbolic importance of Obama’s skin color. Since the United States was inaugurated on the basis of an elision of the legal identities of non-whites, this portrait suggests a new beginning for the nation. Rather than a post-revolutionary war hero as first president, we see a post-civil rights one, whose image on that most American of cultural artifacts, the dollar bill, appears to augur well for a renewed United States, one in which the wounds of slavery have been salved and a racially equitable future is at last possible.

This reading of Friedman’s portrait represents only a mild form of the extravagant hopes for racial rapprochement that were projected onto Obama’s person at the time of his election. *The New York Times* proclaimed in its post-election headline that “Racial Barrier Falls in Decisive Victory” (Nov. 5, 2008). The election of a mixed race individual who identifies himself as black in a country where slavery was legal until 1865 remains, in terms of its historical and cultural symbolism, arguably the most important result of the 2008 election. Throughout the world, headlines announced that blackness was no longer a barrier to becoming the US president (Lemann). The election of a black American president was seen as a sign of hope regarding race relations not only in the United States but in Africa and indeed the whole world (Mandela). Obama was alternately seen as representing a black John F. Kennedy (Bai; Marschall von Bieberstein) or as a symbol of a post-racial United States.

Like his speech at the Democratic Convention in 2004, Obama’s Victory Night speech invoked the American dream of renewal, meritocracy, and the overcoming of hardship, first and foremost with regard to the overcoming of racial prejudice:

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. (Obama, “Election Night” 145)

Since Obama’s electoral campaign and victory, the meaning of his skin color for racial politics in the United States has been continuously debated. For some, Obama was seen as inaugurating a period in America in which race is no longer an identifying issue (Klein). For others,

Obama's victory is viewed as the opportunity for a reinvigoration of race politics similar to that which was achieved during the Civil Rights Era (Hill). And the election has been interpreted as the locus of generational change in black American leadership that is fraught with conflict (Cobb).

Yet for others, the election of Obama and the reactions that this election elicited have been the measure of new, insidious forms of continued racism in the United States (Metzler 137–41; Orelus). The overriding medial emphasis on Obama's race may be a mask for "an ideology of whiteness" that measures black achievement by a far harsher standard than that of whites. As Diana Gavrilos writes:

Until we have a black president as inarticulate as President George W. Bush, racial progress has not really been achieved. [...] While white-male normative power can be sustained with a range of skill levels from mediocrity to highly qualified, most African Americans must be, more often than not, extraordinarily above average to be viewed as successes. (4)

Finally, Obama's racial identity itself remains a topic of hot debate. He identified himself as black American in the last national census, arguably a political act. He is more frequently called "multi- or biracial," and recently Cornel West accused him of being a deracinated "white man with black skin" (Hedges), a seeming reiteration of campaign era allegations that Obama was not black enough. This would seem to cohere with Obama's identifying himself as a "blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views" (Obama, *Audacity* 11). Each of these designations bears the enormous weight of historical racial classifications and significations. Thus another reading of the implications of the Obama presidency on racial politics is that it has presented a continuous opportunity to challenge prevailing concepts of race and to dialogue about the meaning of race in American politics.

Still others point out that Obama's election has not abetted race-related American problems such as the inordinately high incarceration of African American men, racial profiling, and the entrenchment of black poverty (Hill; Harris-Lacewell, "Race"). As this volume goes to press, the nation ponders the death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black youth who was shot to death on February 26th, 2012, under Florida's "stand



your ground” law while he was out buying candy. Obama’s statement to the press that, “You know, if I had a son he would look like Trayvon,” was a rare acknowledgement that by virtue of his appearance he shares in the fate of the continued criminalization of black men in the United States (Shear). Determining the Obama presidency’s effect on race and racial politics is thus a central focus of this book. It opens with Thomas C. Holt’s “Reflections on the Problem of Race in the Age of Obama.” Here, Holt reflects on two moments in US American history that had the potential to be paradigm shifting—Reconstruction and the Civil Rights era—and draws a parallel between them and the Obama presidency. Holt demonstrates how the failure to address economic inequalities as well as invidious forms of racism at these times represented lost chances for greater equality. Thus he warns that a paradigm shift in racial politics will not simply occur because Obama has been elected. Rather it has to be seized upon and knowledgeably encouraged:

In broad terms, then, what we can learn from our earlier history is that this historic and euphoric moment most assuredly represents an opening onto another era, one much like that which our ancestors faced in the 1870s and that which we fought for in the 1960s. But like those earlier moments, the current opening will close if the broader changes in the structures of opportunity in American life are not realized, or, at least, if serious efforts are not made to realize them.

The geography of altered racial politics was only one way in which the election slogan “Change we can believe in” was read onto Obama’s physical person. Another area in which Obama’s presidency was thought to be a measure of change was in his and his wife’s negotiations of gender roles. Here, again, Obama’s person appears to offer something of a blank screen upon which various interpretations of his masculinity can be read. He has been alternately called effeminate—an “Obambi” (Dowd), a unifier of white- and blue-collar notions of masculinity (Woods), or the first unisex president (F. Cooper). These significations appear against the long history of African American masculinity being presented in terms of hyper-embodiment, danger, and lawlessness. This history extends from the Jim Crow era and the racist lynching-driving image of all African American men as would-be rapists to the commodification of so-called gangsta culture through the persons, music, and fashion attire of artists such as 50 Cent and The Game (Hunt; Metzler).

As the most important man in America, it has been argued that Obama supplanted widely disseminated representations of black men as muscled, thuggish gun carriers (Metzler). Embodying an alternative image of African American masculinity, Obama put the face of a professional, Ivy League trained, rhetorically gifted, overtly monogamous, and family-minded black man on the cover of every American periodical. Alternatively, Obama has been seen as representing a pragmatic counter image to an overtly conservative ideal of black male responsibility (Neal). He has also been read as a counter image to the hyper-masculinity of public figures such as George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld in the post-9/11 era (Shaw and Watson; Olson). Since black American masculinity is inalterably linked to how all American men identify themselves (Asim), Obama's effect on issues of American manhood cannot be overestimated.

Obama's visibly successful marriage to an Ivy League educated, professional, tall, athletic woman, who, he moreover has said, would easily beat him in any run for public office (Obama, *Audacity* 327), also introduced a new image of black femininity to the general American conscious. The fervent interest which has been taken in Michelle Obama's biceps, her redefinition of the First Lady wardrobe, and her choice to define her role in the White House primarily as First Mom suggest that she, as much as her husband, is perceived as an important figure regarding the negotiation of American gender roles in general and images of African American women in particular (see Swimmer; Mundy; Erbe; Harris-Lacewell, "Michelle Obama"; Nelson; B. Cooper).

Michelle Obama has alternately been seen as taking on the figurative role of a compliant preacher's wife in her decision to, at least temporarily, put a halt to her own career (Dickerson) and as a role model for black femininity that conforms neither to loud, outspoken, and overweight Mammy stereotypes nor sexualized Jezebel ones, nor to normative white femininity (Tami). In this volume Michaela Hampf traces these transformations in her essay "The Right to Bare Arms: Reading Michelle Obama's Public Image." She surmises that the attention to the First Lady's muscular physique and toned arms has masked interest in her relative blackness as a Harvard educated lawyer and as the descendant of American slaves. Hampf concludes that Michelle Obama has managed to use the public's fascination with her body to subversive ends by re-directing this attention into ostensibly traditiona-

list concerns, such as taking care of children's bodies and health with her "Let's Move!" campaign.

*Obama and the Paradigm Shift* takes Michelle Obama, recently ranked by Forbes as the most powerful woman in the world (Casserly), to be a potentially equally weighty, if by no means uni-directional, agent of cultural change as her husband. The work in this volume demonstrates that an intersectional approach to gender and race is necessary. Initiated by the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectional and Critical Race Theory suggest that neither gender nor race may be viewed in isolation but rather have to be seen in conjunction with one another. Intersectionality informs the essays in this volume by Michaela Hampf, Gabriele Dietze, Greta Olson, and Birte Christ, all of whom argue that readings of the Obamas' relative masculinity and femininity must be viewed as intersecting with categorizations of their racial identities as well as with other identity characteristics.

Thus in her "Barack Obama's 'Identity Performance' and the Intersection of Race and Gender during the Nomination Battle against Hillary Clinton," Dietze returns to the 2008 Democratic primaries to discuss the ramifications of neither of the candidates having cohered with the prototype of a white male politician. Whereas Obama had to negotiate standards of hegemonic masculinity and to fend off allegations of his being an angry black man, Clinton had to negotiate her femininity in contrast to the normative stereotype of men as political leaders. Moreover, the candidates campaigned within the context of the competing narratives of racially motivated and sexist forms of oppression. Whereas more leeway was granted to the two unusual candidates in terms of how they might negotiate their own intersectional representations of gender and race, no actual paradigm shift occurred through the election and presidency. As Dietze argues, "the dominance of white masculinity as the perceived legitimate embodiment of power" has not been altered.

Somewhat differently, my own essay on "Weighing In on Obama: Connections between Embodiment, Class, and Masculinity in the United States and Germany" argues that Obama's thin, muscular body represents a site of ideological contestations concerning ethnicity, class, sexuality, race, and masculinity in US American society. Physical fitness is associated, on the one hand, with elitism, education, and power in the United States. Yet thinness in men is connoted, on the other hand, with femininity and weakness, qualities that Obama must perforce

appear to avoid. Further, this essay points out that Obama's body has not only been inscribed by various conflicting readings, but rather has also been employed performatively by its owner: Obama often refers to his person as a symbolic site of social, partisan, racial, and even transnational unity. Thus, the essay concludes that representations and performances of Obama's corporality have in fact shaken up the status quo of American body politics.

Finally, and perhaps utopically, Obama's election was hailed as the cessation of a long bitter period in which culture wars had predominated American politics (White 218). The candidate's clean-cut image, picture perfect family, and even his call for a return of "religious values" in Democratic politics (Obama, *Audacity* 213) were all viewed as a move toward a reconciliatory position with regard to conservative social values. Hence, Obama's election was hoped to bring in a new period of reconciliation after at least two decades of what was perceived as a bitter divisiveness between those on the political left and right. The so-called culture wars of the 1990s and of the George W. Bush era had split US American society into two polarized factions formed around shared ideologically informed positions regarding issues ranging from abortion to gun control, and to immigration. Along with the electorate, partisan politics became more entrenched, and bipartisan solutions to political issues increasingly impossible.

In his Election Night Victory Speech Obama promised to transform the divided polity and to usher them into a transformative era in which divisions between right and left, red states and blue ones, rich and poor, and ethnic groups would no longer be determining:

It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled—Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the United States of America! (Obama, "Election Night" 145)

Thus "post-partisanship" was the signal post of the Obama campaign and everything it promised (Lizza 36). One important part of the campaign's overt politics of inclusion was its invocation of the immigrant's American dream of success. Through his repeated references to the dream of the promised land of America, Obama successfully reached out

to any number of previously underrepresented voter groups. For instance, Obama's speech at the 2004 Democratic convention called upon the dreams of his Kenyan father to be given the opportunity to further his education in a "magical place" America (Obama, "2004"). These images proved enormously resonant not only for black Americans but also for other groups of people who have felt politically underrepresented in America, such as Latinos (Kiely; Brewington).

Moreover, Obama was successful in appealing to a younger generation of voters by virtue of his inclusion of popular culture idols (Cobb 109–12; Asim) as well as his campaign's deft use of media technology such as social networking sites like MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook (Lister). Through his campaign's use of social media, the president raised 660 million dollars online and galvanized a heretofore politically disenfranchised public into voting (D. Cooper xii). The "Media President's" success has been argued to have altered German politics as well as American ones (Schneider; Trankovits).

Yet in light of November 2010 election results, it would seem that, with the emergence of the Tea Party and ongoing high unemployment levels, political divisiveness and vindictive political discourse are back with a vengeance. From being an image of unity and of overcoming barriers, Obama is now perceived as a figure of "division and distrust" (Cobb 170). Arguably, America has returned even more passionately to its virulent politics of partisanship. This is Andreas Falke's argument in his essay "Obama and Paradigm Change? No Way to Escape the Political Divide." Elected to govern a nation that was deeply divided on every level, Obama ran on the promise of transcending and transforming political as well as cultural polarities. Yet his landmark initiatives and legislative achievements have failed to persuade major segments of the American public of their efficacy. This has emboldened the right wing to mobilize, in part racially motivated, anger against Obama and animosity to his administration. As a result, political polarization has actually dramatically increased. Curiously, however, as Falke concludes, the Republicans' misreading of "voters' rejection of Obama's agenda as support for their own" may backfire and cause them to have to retreat from currently extremist positions.

In light of the American public's disappointed state after the initial euphoria of what was commonly called Obamamania, it may be fitting to examine another representation of the presidency on a cover of *The New Yorker* published a year after the inauguration.

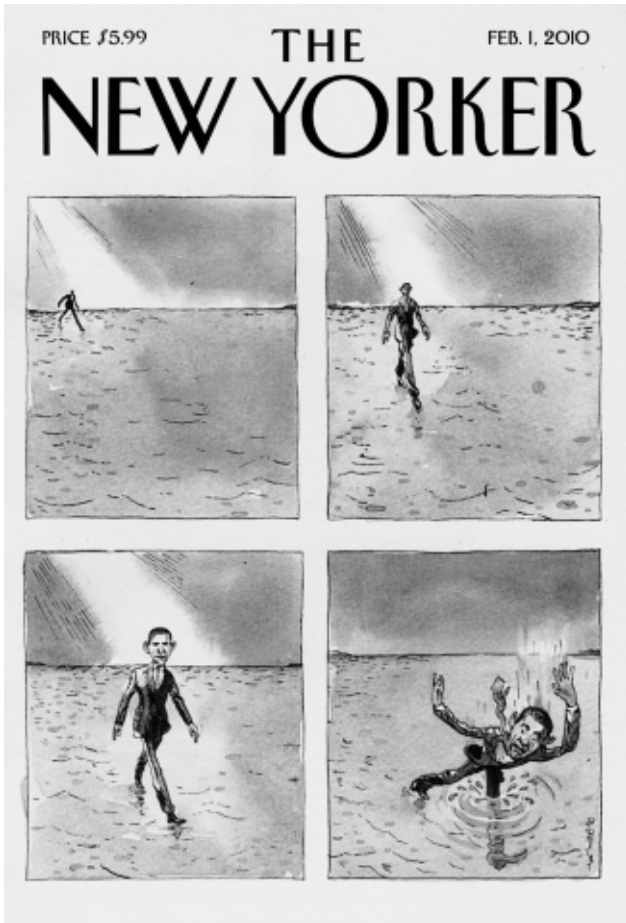


Fig. 2: Barry Blitt, “First Anniversary” (2010)

© Condé Nast

Barry Blitt’s “First Anniversary” invokes New Testament imagery of an Obama messiah who from the distance appears to walk on water, adorned with Jesus rays. Yet on closer inspection and as he moves closer to the viewer’s frame, Obama proves fallible and human, all too human. Rather than walking on water, he appears to be in danger of drowning.

The problems of the “jobless recovery” remain, as do continuing debt negotiations with an intransigent Republican opposition, a potential roll-back of the health care bill, the still present ethical dilemmas represented by Guantanamo and the increased use of drone strikes, and a problem-laden exit strategy from the Afghanistan War.

*Obama and the Paradigm Shift* also takes a trans-Atlantic perspective to reflect on ways that the Obama presidency has impacted on German cultural politics, particularly regarding issues of race, gender, and political division. This reflects the editors’ belief that the location of the conference out of which this volume grew, in Giessen, Germany, and the country in which many of its contributors live is not incidental to how they reflect on and measure the meanings of the Obama presidency. In the first instance, Obamamania and Obama euphoria continue in far less abated forms in Germany than in the United States today. As compared to the United States, Obama’s popularity in Germany remains high (“Obama”): Whereas a poll conducted by the US Marshall fund shows that 81% of German respondents approved of Obama’s foreign policies in 2011, only 54% of American ones did (“Transatlantic” 5).

Witness, for example, the German musical named “Hope!—die Obama Musical Story,” which played in Frankfurt from January to December 2010: This English language musical related the story of Obama’s victorious campaign to a mass audience. Its website hails its message as: “The social world spirit is full of positivity and hope. And people worldwide long for change, peace, and a better world shaped together with each other.”<sup>2</sup> Asked about his motivation for producing and directing the musical “Hope,” Roberto Emmanuele responded that, as the son of Italian immigrant parents growing up in Frankfurt, the only political vision he ever had was of the successful multicultural society that Obama embodies (“Hope”). Thus Barack Obama’s vocal embrace of a heterogeneous America has been understood as a beacon of what a better integrated Germany might in the future become.

Obama was, moreover, thankfully hailed in Germany as a figure of internationalism and multiculturalism (Hammel). Latent tensions that had existed between the US and its trans-Atlantic partners during the

<sup>2</sup> All translations from the German are mine. The original reads: “Der gesellschaftliche Weltgeist voll—positiver Hoffnung—steckt und sich die Menschen weltweit und vorherrschend nach—Veränderung, Frieden und zuletzt nach einer gemeinsam zu gestaltenden besseren Welt sehnen!” (“Hope”).

Clinton administration became far more pronounced after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Pollack). Criticism of America's military actions following the attacks, particularly the invasion of Iraq in 2003, was quite vocal in Germany. Obama's election was perceived to be the augury of a more multilateral United States, less aggressive policies in the Middle East, given Obama's criticism of the war, and an end to Bush's pro-torture and pro-rendition policies. Obama's decision to speak in Berlin during his election campaign rather than in the nominal center of the EU, Brussels, was viewed as an instance of his particular regard for Germany.

Thus Germany's enthusiasm for the American candidate was represented by a sign that was held up during his 2008 visit to Berlin. It read "Obama for Kanzler" (Theile). Reasons for the euphoric reaction to the then candidate are reflected on differently in this volume by its editors, Olson and Christ. Whereas Olson assumes that German enthusiasm rests on a desire for a more visceral, emotion-driven symbolic politics, as inaugurated by the presidency of Joachim Gauck, Christ argues that Germans' initial fascination with Barack Obama represented a form of self-delineation and boundary-making.



Fig. 3: Miguel Villagran, "Obama for Kanzler" (2008)

© ddp images/AP/Miguel Villagran



In light of what has been called the “Sarrazin scandal” of 2009 and 2010 and Chancellor Merkel’s 2011 remarks about the country’s having failed to establish a multicultural society, it appears pertinent to address Obama’s effect on issues of social inclusion and integration within Germany. Thilo Sarrazin was a high-ranking individual at the German Bundesbank as well as a prominent member of the Social Democratic Party. In a 2009 interview Sarrazin made a number of negative remarks about immigrants, which he repeated in various forms in public talks and in his book *Germany Abolishes Itself* (*Deutschland schafft sich ab*, 2010). Amongst the worst of these was his statement in an interview that “I do not have to recognize anyone who lives off the state, who rejects this state, does not bother to take care of his children’s education and who constantly produces new little head-scarf wearing girls” (Berberich, qtd. in Mohr).<sup>3</sup> In analogy to questions concerning German American studies’ obsessive interest in African Americans in Germany (Diedrich and Heinrichs), this volume asks whether Germany’s engagement with Obama is a form of therapy—a working through of its own issues of racial discrimination against non-African but ethnically diverse immigrants. In other words, the focus on Obama may displace German political problems regarding ethnicity and prejudice and prevent their being addressed directly.

Despite Germans’ continued enthusiasm for both the candidate and president Obama, his impact on thorny issues such as failed immigration practices and prejudice against ethnically marked individuals has been minimal. Very few texts have made an analogy between the lack of non-typical persons in the German political sphere, such as individuals of Turkish ancestry, and the emergence of Barack Obama as a global political figure (see Olson in this volume). There is also a consistent pattern within the German press to misread US American racial politics and thus to blunder analyses of the Obamas’ impact on cultural politics (see Christ and Dietze in this volume).

Barack and Michelle Obama may make more of an impact on Germany’s gender politics than on its racial ones or, for systematic reasons, on the ideological divisions between German voters. In particular,

<sup>3</sup> The original reads: “Ich muss niemanden anerkennen, der vom Staat lebt, diesen Staat ablehnt, für die Ausbildung seiner Kinder nicht vernünftig sorgt und ständig neue kleine Kopftuchmädchen produziert.”

Michelle Obama and her negotiations of womanliness and motherhood fascinate Germans. The German language biography of Michelle Obama rapidly topped best seller lists (“‘Geheime’ Bestseller”); TV documentaries such as *Michelle und Barack Obama* in the ARD series *Liebe an der Macht* (*Love Rules*; January 4, 2010), moreover, attest to the German interest in the couple’s romantic life. As one of its points of departure, the analysis of Michelle’s gender performance and its impact on Germany assumes that an engagement with Michelle Obama allows Germans to grapple with their own ambiguous attitudes toward women in politically powerful positions. These include the Chancellor, the labor minister, and the minister of family affairs, and their varying self-representations as women.

This is Birte Christ’s subject in her essay “Michelle Obama, the Good American and Icon of Global Power Femininity: Gender Politics and National Boundary-Making in German News Coverage.” Christ uncovers a discursive pattern that may be relevant for more than Germany alone: German news coverage aligns Germany with the role of the “good” American, which it first assigned to Barack and later to Michelle Obama. Accordingly, delineations are made between what are considered to be positive aspects of Germany and negative ones of the United States. This self-definitional boundary-making relies on the construction of a binary division between the “good” and the “bad” American into which the Obamas can be made to fit in their pre- and post-election representations in the German press. Christ’s analyses of representations of Michelle Obama’s “global power femininity,” moreover, also reveal a continued ambivalence about the role of women in the political sphere and the emergence of post-feminist identificational strategies as one way of containing this ambivalence.

Whereas the focus of this book is Obama’s effect on US American, German, and, to a lesser degree, global “cultural politics,” a definition of this very term has so far gone lacking. While the contributors to this volume come from a variety of disciplines including history, American studies, African American studies, sociology, education, and political science, they share a conviction that the popular and the cultural are indivisible from the political and ideological. This volume then embraces a commitment made by practitioners of cultural studies that their work must of necessity encompass politically pressing issues (S. Hall; McRobbie, *Postmodernism* 46; Kahn and Kellner; G. Hall).

With Angela McRobbie, we would argue that “cultural studies can only be defined as an intellectual practice, as a way of politicizing theory and theorizing politics” (*Back* 7). Thus *Obama and the Paradigm Shift* regards the objects of cultural analysis to be not simply textual representations but the political economy and social processes in which representations, texts, and cultural phenomena interact. It also regards the added value of working to surmount disciplinary boundaries to discuss issues such as race, gender, and the cultural divide.

Inquiring whether or not a paradigm shift can be observed in various arenas of public and political life in the US and in Germany, *Obama and the Paradigm Shift* moves back and forth between commentators arguing that measurable change has occurred—both in the US and in Germany—and those that do not. For instance, Helen Bond’s “Shattering Ceilings Worldwide: Obama’s Presidency and Its Impact on the Identity and Political Consciousness of Children in the United States, Sierra Leone, China, Russia, and Jamaica” captures the euphoric sense of a breakthrough that followed upon the 2008 election. In an empirical study of school-aged youth, Bond and fellow researchers have documented the effect of Obama’s victory on respondents’ sense of what Obama means for them personally and what his effect on racial politics has been in their own countries as well as the United States. Her findings demonstrate an unequivocal “Obama effect” with children, regardless of race, predominantly describing him as a protector and a role model, as well as someone who empowers their own sense of political agency. While recognizing that national politics significantly affect children’s perceptions and also taking note of a potential generational gap in perceptions of the president, Bond’s findings demonstrate that Obama has served as cross-cultural role model and racial exemplar. Her essay thus coheres more with that of Hampf and Olson in that she identifies clearly how the Obama presidency has contributed to a substantial alteration in the cultural-political status quo.

Michael Butter’s and Jörn Ahrens’s essays also posit probable political-cultural shifts that can be associated with the Obama presidency, if ones with negative ramifications. In his “The Birthers’ New World Order: Conspiracy Theories about Barack Obama,” Butter investigates a (re)new(ed) post-election influence of conspiracy theory on mainstream political discourse. In that Republican politicians regularly refrain from explicitly dismissing conspiracy theories that specifi-

cally target Obama as, for instance, not being truly American, they intensify a new set of culture wars and further the process of political division. Thus, as Butter concludes, while this has been by no means of his volition, “the Obama presidency has undoubtedly accelerated the erosion of the political mainstream and served as a catalyst for an ever more heated atmosphere of partisanship.” On this point, Butter comes close to Falke in his diagnosis of the current political moment.

Ahrens’s “Images of the Political: Obama and Post-Democracy” argues that the Obama presidency is symptomatic of a problematic elision of difference “between political and social spheres.” Post-democratic political culture is characterized by its emphasis on pathos and its veneration of individual charismatic figures to the disregard of actual political programs. A master of the “big speech,” Obama has presented a non-specific “face” that has allowed for easy identification. He has also relied on the affective resonance of personalized stories instead of political analysis. This melodramatic political style has, however, translated poorly in Obama’s transition from acting as a campaigner to acting as the president.

Like Ahrens, Sabine Sielke concentrates on rhetoric in her essay “The Poetics of Presidency and the Promises of Change: Reading Barack Obama,” if to differing effect. Somewhat analogous to Holt, she offers a cautionary tale of potential positive change, although she does “not deem paradigm shifts possible in any (political) culture, even if what happens in some places in North Africa right now may amount to a fundamental transformation.” Her essay sheds light on the paradoxical connections between poetics, poetry, and presidency, thus taking up the phrase that campaigning is poetry whereas governing is prose. Sielke contextualizes Obama’s usage of tropes of change as a serial variation within a rhetorical history of positing the United States as an ongoing project in which renewal, transformation, and reinvention have always been central as have the forces of suppression that have rendered these calls for change so urgent. She reminds her readers that the United States has repeatedly imagined and re-envisioned itself by way of sermons, exhortations, poems, fiction, photographs, moving pictures, and presidential rhetoric. Thus, while in the face of historical evidence, Holt argues that Obama’s election can only lead to a change in racial politics if the structural economic inequalities that underpin various

forms of racism are eliminated. Sielke, by contrast, points out that discourse and rhetoric likewise contribute to the political process.

Finally, Allyson Hobbs concludes the volume and its discussion of whether the presidency has brought about a shift in cultural politics by returning to the topic of race. Her essay "Conclusion: A Paradigm Shift in Fits and Starts" echoes Sielke's in that it points out that the American desire for redemption, specifically for a redemption from the pain and trauma caused by our racial history, may have led to a collective desire to want to believe that the Obama election might represent "a happy ending." A former student of Thomas C. Holt, Hobbs's reflective piece provides a younger historian's purview of "the ambiguities and complexities in the meanings of Obama's election" and includes a rehearsal of entrenched race-related problems such as material disparities between "majority-minority" school districts and "majority-white" ones, continued patterns of racial segregation in housing, and the mass imprisonment of men of color.

Hobbs then offers Holt's volume *The Problem of Race in the 21st Century* as a template for imagining a racial history after Obama and quotes his words: "We must be able to imagine a different future if we are to be able to change the present and thus shape that future" (120). With Holt, this volume wishes to imagine that future by acting outside of the constraints of the present. It is to him, Thomas C. Holt, and his partner, feminist and material cultural historian and Jewish Studies scholar, Leora Auslander, and their transnational work in building bridges and eradicating racism that this volume is dedicated (Auslander and Holt).

Regarding *Obama and the Paradigm Shift*'s central question of how much change has occurred, the contributors provide a broad range of answers and definitional possibilities about what paradigmatic change actually entails and whether this change might be considered negative or positive. The essays in this volume thus demonstrate that there is no prevailing consensus about whether the Obama presidency has enacted a paradigm shift. Yet what the presidency has certainly achieved is a necessary reconsideration of racial politics, gender, intersectionality, political division and cohesion, and rhetoric within and without the American political and cultural arena.

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