

10-13-2010

# Revamping the Welfare State: Obama and the Class Challenge of American Politics

Westenley Alcenat  
*Macalester College*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/maccivicf>

---

### Recommended Citation

Alcenat, Westenley (2010) "Revamping the Welfare State: Obama and the Class Challenge of American Politics," *Macalester Civic Forum*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/maccivicf/vol4/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Global Citizenship at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester Civic Forum by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

## **Revamping the Welfare State: Obama and the Class Challenge of American Politics**

Westenley Alcenat

### **I. Introduction: A Civic Problem**

In 1903, the Civil Rights leader and scholar activist, W. E. B. Du Bois, warned that:

THE PROBLEM of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

At every stage of major historical events in America in the last century, Du Bois's thesis has been validated. The New Deal, for example, failed to radicalize the politics of race and create a more inclusive union. Instead, what initially seemed to be a class struggle took on the racialized perception of being more socially beneficial to white Americans than to others. Furthermore, the notoriety of the Civil Rights movement, in terms of the conflicts it posed between government and civil demands, and between the professed ideals of the Constitution and the legal practice of racial segregation, substantiates Du Bois's claim. President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society also emerged with a racial premise, except this time whites viewed its social policies as benefiting African Americans. More importantly, the cultural and racial backlash spurred by the Civil Rights movement and the Great Society extended well into the 1960s and 1970s, further highlighting the significance of the color-line.

Yet, what if we reconsider the Du Boisian analysis in a different light? This essay will part ways with his racial analysis to argue that the sociopolitical lives of Americans are also dominated by a national consciousness of individualism. As a result, many Americans disregard issues relating to the class problems of the country. Consequently, focusing on issues of class inequalities is easily confused with socialism. Therefore, while race and class mutually reinforce each other, the political and social perceptions in which they are framed view class as unimportant. The Tea Party movement, while not representative of the larger public, is symptomatic of this point. Reframing Du Bois's warning, this essay argues that in the 21st century (as in the 20th century), U.S. politics lacks a class consciousness. It accentuates the schism between traditional American individualism and an emerging need to redress acute class issues.

In short, the essay frames this as a uniquely American problem: the overemphasis on the individual over society at the expense of recognizing wider class inequalities. Understanding this dichotomy explains some of the difficulties President Barack Obama experienced in his efforts to overhaul the health care system and why the initiative is sometimes labeled socialism. The major objective of the argument is to analyze class and racial issues that have come to characterize the challenges and limits the President faces in his efforts. Thus, portions of this article are arguably opinionated, and use the Tea Party movement as an example to highlight facts and sources. Other sections are substantively more historically grounded.

The essay starts by providing a review of Obama as an emerging political phenomenon. The following section scrutinizes the Tea Party movement and why it opposes Obama's policies, as well as how its grievances contextualize American individualism within a class perspective. That perspective is rooted in Ayn Rand's "egoism" and "objectivism" and John Locke's principles of governance. The study then provides a deeper commentary on the failures of Obama's leadership, with some suggestions about lessons to be learned in reaching the American public. The conclusion summarizes the need for a renewed sense of leadership built on the opportunities stemming from the current crises and driven by new ideas for reforming the welfare state.

## **II. Overview: The Phenomenon of Obama**

Given the enormous crises he inherited, including the deepest economic recession in generations and a deteriorated welfare state, Obama is the only president to successfully bring the country nearer to universal health care. Before delving into the substance of why health care reform has been controversial, consider how President Obama's role in framing the policy constructs his political image. Built by public perceptions of his politics, Obama's image involves complex representations of his status as the country's first black president. In the subsequent paragraphs, the overview helps to broadly clarify the grievances of the opposition against health care reform, the President's number one item on the domestic agenda.

First, health care reform is the Obama administration's signature domestic objective because it does the most to significantly alter the U.S.'s systemic class structures.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it highlights the President's goal to rebuild what he sees as the decline of American human capital in the last three decades.<sup>3</sup> On March 21, 2010, that promise was partially realized when the United States Congress passed a landmark health care bill. The legislation passed despite well-organized resistance from the Republican Party, most significantly embodied in the rise of the Tea Party movement.

"Obamacare," as his opponents deride it, is politically progressive in its objectives and it is ambitiously transformative. Like the initiatives of the Franklin D. Roosevelt government in the 1930s, the current administration hopes the reform will provide a transformation that redresses the failures of the unmitigated marketplace.<sup>4</sup> The health care initiative is the Obama administration's prescription of progressivism as a pragmatic dosage of social remedy. However, in today's political arena, the biggest question still confronting any president is whether it is possible to be both a great social transformer and a pragmatist in American politics. The enactment of the national health care bill is the largest private-public partnership since the days of Lyndon Johnson's entitlement programs, Medicare and Medicaid. The measure requires most Americans to have health insurance coverage and will add 16 million people to the Medicaid program. It will also subsidize private insurance for low- and middle-income families. Moreover, it regulates the health insurance industry more closely by limiting its ability to deny insurance to certain patients.<sup>5</sup> This push for a national health care system makes Mr. Obama the quintessential social democrat of the 21st century.

Beyond the social democrat label, what is the Obama phenomenon? As columnist David Brooks points out in "Getting Obama Right," to the Republican conservatives Obamacare disrupts the functions of the marketplace and is a government intrusion into the personal business of American citizens.<sup>6</sup> Brooks's observation speaks to the belief of many in the Tea Party movement that Obama is against everything that is American. Hence, he is undermining the country's political identity, mainly the privatist ethos of American individualism. On this point,

the “Tea Partiers” share some of the Left’s complaints that Obama believes in the scientific expertise of government. That is to say, the President thinks he can mollify the forces of capitalism through intellectual management. As historian Eric Foner points out, Obama’s belief is reminiscent of Jimmy Carter’s micromanagement style that is distinctly of the highly educated, centrist liberal class.<sup>7</sup> However, the changing nature of the times—the crises of markets and subsequently the feared decline in the power of the individual in the market—presses Obama to construct himself as the pragmatic American, conceivably rising above politics. Like a Republican, he rejects a command-and-control regulation regime, but, like a Democrat, he embraces those regulatory reforms and tools that help the market operate effectively.<sup>8</sup> This move ensures the Left that he is still a champion of their social causes, but more importantly reassures the Republican Party that he is simply moderating the system, not overhauling it. In this scenario, Obama is no one’s politician except the nation’s—crafting the impression that he is above politics. To echo *The New York Times* political columnist, Mat Bai, unlike his predecessor, the President wants to govern on the premise that he is the antithesis of Washington’s political culture, hence uninterested in building a political majority for his allies.<sup>9</sup> He thus elevates himself to a separate plane, one that transcends the status quo and is seemingly transformative. Such a detached political role further ensures that the President is flexible enough to claim that he stands on neutral ground.

The President’s pragmatism is seen in his willingness to concede on liberal Democratic goals like the public health care plan favored by the Left. Called the “public option,” it would have greatly reduced the power of health insurers by enabling governmental competition and consequently driving down premiums.<sup>10</sup> Many in the Republican Party believe it would signify a complete government takeover of the health system. The decision of the President to remove the public option from the health care bill preserves and expands the existing private health insurance industry. The move will help the industry gain some 16 million new customers.<sup>11</sup> In bowing to the Republicans, the President does not want the expansion of health care to be implicated in charges of socialism. To Democrats, this withdrawal means that Mr. Obama fails to embody the Johnsonian or New Deal democrat they were hoping to get. In maneuvering this defeat, Republicans emerged victorious, concluding that many Americans see the private sector as more effective and efficient than the government.

While the Republicans believe that the American people are on their side of the argument, President Obama believes that he has a mandate for change that supersedes their claims. Obama’s landmark election to the presidency has been mythologized, almost in a messianic way, as the change that would reinvigorate the country. Indeed, the historical significance of his presidency was 400 years in the making. In overcoming the liabilities of race in a history fraught with centuries of usurpations of minority civil rights, Obama has vindicated the Civil Rights struggle and its promise of a multiracial democracy. He helped, therefore, to rebuild the American conception of racial democracy by integrating the country’s principles into a more tangible manifestation of the Jeffersonian rhetoric that, “All men are created equal.” In fact, Obama himself argues that one goal of his presidency was to realize this idealized national belief.

In his speech “A More Perfect Union,” candidate Obama maintains that his objective is to “narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their [the Founding Fathers’] time...to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America.”<sup>12</sup> The latter part of Mr. Obama’s rhetoric, argues the Republican Party, demonstrates his longing for an America that corresponds to his hopes for a socialist nation. And yet, the racial phenomenon that Obama

represents has even perforated the Republican establishment. *The New York Times* reports that at least 32 African Americans are running for Congress this year as Republican candidates, a surge not seen since Reconstruction. The candidates admit that Mr. Obama's election empowered them to appeal to the white electorate. The phenomenon of Obama is thus the transformability of his presidency. He transformed how race and politics intersect in U.S. society's imagination of itself. Hence, Obama as President lessens the skepticism that white voters may have had about black candidates. Through him, those candidates are granted better accessibility to the traditionally conservative blocs of the Republican constituency. In this context, President Obama blurs the color-line, even in a post-partisan way, as he challenges the institutional polarity of racism. In essence, Obama's historic accomplishment as the first black president is "The leading edge of this change, but his success is merely the ripple in a pond that grows deeper every day."<sup>13</sup>

Even more significant is the epiphenomenalism of Obama as a contemporary producer of history. Simply put, the President has unleashed the deep racial hopes and antagonisms of the country's history. As another candidate acknowledged, Obama's election victory can be viewed through the lens of history and partisan politics.<sup>14</sup> That statement has two critical perspectives: the historical *and* the political representations of the President. On the one hand, the post-partisanship that his election produced is driven by the historical search in America for a leader that would absolve the country of its embattled racial legacy. Obama offered himself as the quintessential citizen that Americans aspire to be, a person whose "story has seared into [his] genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one."<sup>15</sup> In embodying this oneness, Obama represents the hopes of America to transcend its racial sins. Correspondent and Public Television commentator Gwen Ifill makes an insightful observation that, "White supporters seemed to take deep satisfaction in [Obama's usage of] the idea—that he could be raceless, a reassuringly optimistic view of America's deepest burden."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, he fuels partisan politics because, as one of his Republican nemeses, Newt Gingrich, remarked, "partly the level of hostility to Obama, Pelosi and Reid makes a lot of people pragmatically more open to a coalition" to oppose him.<sup>17</sup>

These dichotomous views of Obama's presidency—racially inspiring, but provocatively activist—explain why even after extolling the symbolism of the President's power, the black Republican candidates are trying to align themselves with the Tea Partiers. This shift occurs in spite of the fact that 25 percent of Tea Party supporters think that the Obama administration's policies favor blacks over whites.<sup>18</sup> Yet, to these black candidates, the number grossly exaggerates what they see as plain populism against Obama's policies, not a racist narrative that they argue is a news media fiction. The black Republican candidates point to their skin color as evidence that the Tea Party is indeed anti-Obama, but is not motivated by race.

The Tea Party movement's reactionary populism precipitously formed against the backdrop of Obama's audacious aim to correct the inefficiencies of government and markets in providing health care. The President wants to revamp the welfare state through a social contract in which government serves as an innovative, efficient, and accountable catalyst for service, while also acting as a critical problem-solving partner.<sup>19</sup> The Affordable Health Care for America Act reflects this vision. Yet, how to persuade the public to support his vision in a social landscape as vast and diverse as the U.S. proves difficult. In electing Barack Obama as the first African American president, the American electorate took a big leap of faith. For some, the symbolism of that election presented the hope and opportunity to make significant changes. Disappointingly, the synergy of that hope did not mobilize into a public majority that could help the President execute his agenda for health care reform.

### III. The Limits of Class

The fact that the euphoria over a black president did not materialize into support for health care reform harkens back to the bulk of the argument of this essay, which is that race and class interacted in myriad ways to produce a backlash against health care reform. That backlash is primarily evident in the Tea Party movement, composed of a subset of voters within the Republican constituency. Though small in numbers, their dissenting voices sprung up loudly against Obama's health care agenda. Tea Partiers believe in a strict, economically conservative ideology that limits governmental power, promotes fiscal responsibility, and empowers the free market.<sup>20</sup> The Tea Party Patriots, the main organizers of the movement, emerged preemptively in the spring of 2009 to block Obama's health care initiative, arguing that his economic policies are recipes for disaster.<sup>21</sup> To understand why this minority matters as a voice of dissent, it is helpful to evaluate its profile in the context of its complaints against Obama's governance. What are the grievances toward the phenomenon of Obama and his professed ideas for an apparent social democracy and his efforts to implement health care reform?

For the Tea Party constituency, a survey conducted by *The New York Times* suggests that the Obama administration triggers "Deep pessimism about the direction of the country and the conviction that the policies of Mr. Obama are disproportionately directed at helping the poor rather than the middle classes or the rich."<sup>22</sup> In that same poll, an overwhelming majority of Tea Partiers does not think Mr. Obama shares the values of most Americans or understands their problems. They are exceedingly troubled about the American economy, and a majority thinks the administration's policies favor the poor and African Americans.<sup>23</sup> The conundrum here is that they are against Obama's prioritization of class issues, but they view his handling of race as radically similar. This suggests that Tea Partiers conflate race and class. The emphasis of their rhetoric implies that blacks are socially and traditionally of the lower classes. In essence, any policy that is class oriented is therefore disproportionately focused on redressing racial issues. They also argue that concerns about the problems facing African Americans are overblown, and hence the social politics of the President is biased.<sup>24</sup> Generally, they are angered by the health care overhaul and government spending, and they have the sense that they are not represented in the concerns of the federal government. African Americans figure in that last point because their disproportionate position in the poor and working classes makes them by default the recipients of the government's supposedly abundant largesse.

A *New York Times* profile reveals that Tea Partiers compose 18 percent of the country's population and tend to be Republican, white, male, married, and older than 45.<sup>25</sup> By sheer voting and financial power—they are wealthier and substantively more educated than the rest of the country—the Tea Party movement is a force not to be overlooked. At its depth, the dissatisfaction of Tea Party supporters against government is rooted in Ayn Rand's philosophy. They borrow from Ayn Rand's concepts of "egoism" and "objectivism," two principles that stand in stark contrast to President Obama's communitarianism and collectivism. Egoism and objectivism conceptually promote the self-interest of the individual as the pursuit of freedom. Only in those two principles, they would argue, can a true social system emerge in which the welfare of the individual prospers and individual rights flourish. Thus, they would argue that Obamacare has been or should be discredited because it is rooted in a naive altruistic motive to render the American individual subservient to society. That explains why they describe their

movement's main goal as reducing the size of government. According to *The New York Times*, three-quarters of those favoring small government want further cuts in spending and lower taxes.

The focus on Rand's philosophy highlights what has historically been American individualism rooted in a Lockean perspective. To Tea Partiers, such a culture represents the fabric of the country's political identity. Some Americans believe that the President's advocacy for a change in the distribution of services, particularly health care, is an attempt to override the Lockean culture. Data collected from *The New York Times* is particularly telling of this grievance. When asked what they are angry about, more than 90 percent of Tea Partiers point to the country heading in the wrong direction under the Obama administration, a view that is ideologically driven. On that note, they believe that "America's best years are behind us," because programs like national health care are proof that Obama is "Doing what the Founding Fathers never intended to be done with the federal government."<sup>26</sup> One respondent expressed her complaint that, "Mr. Obama is getting away from what America is. [Therefore] he's a socialist."

What is America to the Tea Partiers? It is, in the simplest terms, a unique place that promotes democracy in an individual context. It is arguable that Tea Partiers view themselves as modern day "Jacobins" of America. Their repudiation of any notion of dependency, coupled with the rhetoric of "taking back America," is the conviction that the country must be liberated from Obama's socialism. So entrenched is this belief that the population of the United States is reluctant, historically and contemporarily, to accept social progressivism as radically as Mr. Obama would like. The U.S., it appears, does not produce good results through the conflation of class, society, and politics. That is to say, the U.S. is exceptional among nations in its relationship between politics and great social transformations. It seems to be incapable of implementing policies with even a slight implication of socialist politics. The argument here is that if, *prima facie*, Obama's goal is to transform health care as an attempt to install some form of socialized medicine, then it would inevitably invoke fears of socialism. Thus, the administration is confronted with a society wherein the direct confluence between class and politics does not hold as simply as it perhaps would in Western European societies. Americans lack the political consciousness to think of themselves as class subjects, thereby inhibiting Obama's project to conduct a massive redistribution of human services.

The political structure of America is usually unreceptive to change that requires confronting or renouncing the accumulation of capital. Whereas Obama believes in a communitarian approach to health care goods and services, Americans in general embrace the individualism of acquiring such capital, not as a public good, but rather as a reflection of a meritocracy. That meritocracy stems from preconceived notions of privatism. In other words, Americans are individually endowed with the right to private material goods. Restricting others, primarily the poor, from receiving such benefits is just part of the equation. To generalize, individualism is synonymous with American nationhood. This encourages a universal belief in the doctrine that individuals, if left to their own devices, will eventually generate their own social welfare in an unregulated marketplace.<sup>27</sup> When that belief is confronted, as it is through Obama's agenda, the President's policies are accused of being skewed towards the poor, a class often regarded as undeserving of those goods.

Moreover, the individualism of the American worker when coupled with America's diverse composition—including race, ethnicity, and class—translates into a stratification of racial, rather than class, interests that cannot sufficiently challenge the political system on a macro scale. The notion that capitalism creates an antagonistic proletariat against capital does not seem to hold. Obama cannot hope to homogenize Americans. They are too diverse in their racial and ethnic

interests to rally singularly around a social politics promoting the general welfare. American workers, argues J. M. Bernstein, “are presumed to be self-owning, selling their labor time and labor power to whom they wish.”<sup>28</sup> As many as half of the general public shares the opinion of Tea Partiers who, by 92 percent, say Obama is moving the country closer to socialism.<sup>29</sup> Viewed in this regard, the Tea Partiers do not operate in a vacuum of support. They reflect a philosophy shared by many, if not a majority, of Americans.

More succinctly, the Lockean logic of the U.S. political system renders Americans impervious to deep transformational change. In other words, Americans lack a collective class consciousness, which inhibits the growth of a socialist democratic majority to readily respond to the change Obama seeks. The early achievement of political democracy following the American Revolution gave the American polity no great incentive (or necessity) to challenge capital directly. In Western Europe, the struggle for enfranchisement and against feudalism fostered a strong class consciousness that led Europeans to think more in the collective sense of public good. In contrast, the American citizen—a citizenry restricted to white men with property—took on the political identity of being an equal entity unto himself, standing in opposition to the state. That truth repressed the potential for a social democratic majority. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, class consciousness was constrained by the instant marriage of individual to capital, which coalesced with the emergence of a national identity.

The class relationship to capital provides a causal explanation for why Republicans and Tea Party members admonish Obama’s health care agenda as un-American. Whereas Obama is proposing a system that eradicates class boundaries in health services, they deride it as communism, mainly because they view themselves as classless individuals and private entities unto themselves. This belief removes the social necessity for a good that is perceived as already self-provided, further reinforcing the notion that Americanism is synonymous with the private accumulation of goods.<sup>30</sup> This opposition, in turn, suffocated the political progress on national health care by attempting to restrict a privileged good, health care, from those at the margins of society, mainly the poor and the working class. Insofar as it is a good derived from meritocratic efforts, health care, they believe, is a matter of survival of the fittest, restricted to those who can effectively participate in the market on an individual basis. From this angle, the poor and the working classes have neither the resources nor the capacity to succeed, automatically making them the weakest link in the competition.

Moreover, this belief further empowers insurance companies because most Americans identify their interests with the socioeconomic status quo. What is the status quo in this context? It is the American Dream: social mobility and American privatism. And such dynamics tend to absorb or thwart potential radical movements. Hence, health care reform becomes insurance reform. As presidential historian H. W. Brands remarked, “Americans are status quo friendly; if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. Obama’s opportunity was to arrive when the status quo had been jolted and, in the eyes of many, discredited.”<sup>31</sup> While true, his observation largely fails to account for the fact that Obama is not accepted as the ultimate fixer. This resentment has to do with the fact that Obama, as a social democrat, is cast as unable to simultaneously be a redeemer of the market’s social failures and a defender of American individualism.

The private ethos of American political consciousness is seen in the current health care system, which is reluctant to accept policies redressing class inequalities. Disinclined to confront capital more acutely, American individualism—associated with whiteness—supported a two-tiered health care system: public, tax-supported health care for the poor (normalized as blacks and other people of color in usual political and cultural custom) set apart from privately funded care for the

self-supporting (whites). The former system is represented by Medicare, Medicaid, and other government programs that already pay for almost half of American health care. Ironically, subsidized health care is viewed by the public as outside the American norm, and thus employed only as a mechanism to mitigate the problems caused by those incapable of navigating the private enterprise system. Indeed, sociologist Terry Boychuk articulates this in his study, *The Making and Meaning of Hospital Policy*. He argues that a bipartisan consensus in the post-war era instituted private insurance as the vehicle for mass coverage, relegating the government to the role of insurer of last resort.<sup>32</sup> Unsurprisingly, this is an example of the Lockean sensibility of the American public and the tendency to minimize the role of government as much as possible.

Surveying this virtually stagnant political class consciousness, what sabotaged Obama's leadership in the health care debate is not his lack of communication with the people. Instead it is because the people's historical consciousness is driven by Lockean, not Marxian, ideology. At issue is whether collectivizing the financial burden of medical care is ideologically in line with the Lockean social order and, under that framework, whether it is appropriate to substitute a socialized initiative for a capitalistic one. On that question, the success of the Tea Party movement rests on its ability to convince Americans that adopting a national health care system would part ways with their traditional understanding of the relationship between government and the private sphere. If instituted, the Republicans argue, health care reform would destabilize individual freedoms by allowing the federal government to command state governments to administer a socialist program.<sup>33</sup> This argument is directly taken from Locke's emphasis on individual consent as the mechanism by which the political and social can merge. In the case of Obama's proposed national health care, dissenters argue, the public interest would submerge the sovereignty of the people, thus leaving Obama as the prime health care distributor (hence derives the term Obamacare). This idea of the sovereign individual as the ultimate source of authority suppresses what Bernstein argues is "the manifold ways that individuality is beholden to a complex and uniquely modern form of life."<sup>34</sup> In essence, the individual transcends institutional and communal dependency and exists, albeit within society, as a complete self-governing entity.

For many Americans, socialism is associated with big government, and big government is a social problem that burdens their individuality as well as encroaches on the private sphere. Tea Partiers are perhaps the most unapologetic adherents of this ideology, forming a political apparatus that labors to derail health care reform. The unregulated private sphere benefits the resiliency of American individualism. Individuality in this context is associated with a common historical consciousness that prides John Locke's logic of privatism over Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of a general will that infallibly benefits the people. It points to why the public has been more accepting of a moderate health program that incorporates health insurance companies, as Obama's initiative has attempted to do.

Lastly, the political division of the socioeconomic classes is such that it has stymied health care legislation. While class-based politics influenced the government response to labor demands during the New Deal, it failed to supplant ethnic, racial, and regional identities already woven into the fabric of American life. The diverse backgrounds of Americans restrict solidarity on an inter-group basis and thus suffocate the potential for networking across lines of difference. This embedded culture of segmented loyalties has meant that energy that could have challenged health insurance companies through unions is diverted instead to sustaining local, ethnic, religious, and political institutions. This has inevitably slowed far-reaching change (like the health care reform Obama wants) and constrained any direct challenge to capital. The Great

Depression did not produce a socialist movement. It also did not radicalize the working class. Boychuk's historical analysis explains the dynamics of that division:

The granting of the vote to the laboring classes in early stages of industrialization dampened working-class radicalism. Labor movements could not appeal to the solidarities implied in the shared experience of political disenfranchisement. Pronounced barriers to working-class political mobilization stemming from crosscutting social cleavages contributed to the hegemony of loosely articulated bourgeois parties over national policy making. Class-specific appeals did not become the central organizing theme of national campaigns in the postwar era.<sup>35</sup>

If there is an American proletariat, it is not culturally, racially, or ethnically homogeneous. Nor was it formed in direct conflict to capitalism. This segmentation not only inhibited class consciousness, but subsequently created a political culture of sectional interests. In their ideal path to social mobility, Americans generally do not possess a significant awareness of class distinctions and instead lean in favor of retaining the status quo. Obama's message, then, of collectivized health care stands in opposition to the broader American consensus on individual fulfillment.

In sum, the Tea Party perceives government power as limitless and the evils of the welfare state necessitate the broad expansion of individual responsibility. Equally evident within this agenda is the de-politicization of the public sphere through the increased politicization of the individual. Hence, national health care as a public good is largely scorned because the individual should not be subordinated to the common good. Deregulation and privatization thus become rampant and strip the citizen of any obligation to others. The public good, viewed as a pathological drain on the market, is individualized to accommodate personal responsibility. This free-market fundamentalism undermines public solidarity through an unchecked ideology of privatization. Furthermore, it derides government support for the unemployed, poor, and economically under-resourced as socialism—a constraint on the market-driven logic of unrestricted individual responsibility.<sup>36</sup>

#### **IV. Leadership Failures**

The country is currently in a deep economic crisis, one that provokes fear, disrupts national unity, and diminishes public confidence in institutions. The Tea Party movement not only reflects this anxiety, but heightens national divisions as the Tea Partiers and President Obama polarize the political scene through their ideological confrontations. The President's credibility has partially been fractured by the label of socialism. The American polity is therefore divided at a time that demands unity. This division inevitably creates a vacuum of power in the public discourse on how to move the country forward. Given the catastrophic conditions in which he is leading, and the fragile political climate in which he must maneuver, the President must prevent the further fragmentation of the polity and keep the entire system from becoming politically moribund. The American public is often averse to politics that hint at socialistic transformations. This confronts Obama with an ideological block. Although he succeeded in enacting his version of health care reform, he will need to be just as tenacious to prevent the opposition from diluting his other major legislative agendas, particularly comprehensive immigration reform and environmental policies. To do so, President Obama must (1) reassert civic leadership by introducing bold ideas that unite and reform, (2) re-energize the confidence of the populace in government, and (3) assert the primacy of his leadership.

First, to counteract the current political culture, Obama must provide legislation that restructures people's economic relationships with institutions and, subsequently, redefines the economy. The President did not properly utilize innovative ideas in combating conventional norms. Although he prevented a Great Depression on Wall Street, the country witnesses the continued decline of economic livelihoods. Although he argued for a safety net for the too-big-to-fail corporate entities, small businesses are experiencing budget cuts. Although he subsidized the largest financial institutions, the consumers and taxpayers resent these institutions for their lack of reciprocity, viewing them as free riders. It is appropriate here to point out that the Tea Party's concerns are not entirely without merit. Their policy logic, albeit a paradoxical demand, is that the President must perform a balancing act: pursue health care reform without cumulatively expanding government, and retain services like Medicare and Social Security but not at the expense of individual choices by the hard-working producers of wealth.

In short, Obama prevented a Great Depression, but did not avert a moral crisis or the continuing decadence of the financial culture. While he excels at pragmatism, he failed at instituting broad social transformations that could have exploited the political opportunities generated by the crisis. His policies skewed more toward rebuilding institutions rather than reforming them. This is a failure of leadership insofar as he wasted the chance to delegitimize old economic ideas and reshuffle resources in a fashion that did not pit Wall Street against Main Street. Precisely because existing economic institutions are products of old economic ideas, fundamentally reforming them would have given the president the political capital to convince the nation that the current economic crisis is a function of a particular set of institutional failures. In not contesting this underlying factor, Obama legitimized the existing corporate culture, encouraged the burgeoning of right-wing populism, and ultimately reduced his chances to build coalitions to restructure the relationship of the polity to the welfare state.

Second, historically, when the nation falls on hard times, the people have looked to government for a solution. The contemporary climate instead has produced a different result: a greater reduction in the size of government and its services. This paradox, as explained throughout the essay, facilitated a populism grounded in American individualism and an ideological roadblock to significant social change. The current economic distress not only fueled right-wing populist sentiments against health care reform, but also weakened the President from asserting the need for government in resolving problems. This resulted in minimal civic participation in the shaping of a transformative legislation. Coalition building ensures stability by reconstituting collective interests in addressing the major dysfunctions of the economy (the health care industry being a primary example). So far, however, Obama has failed to harness such civic participation.

Third, President Obama's political leadership can be typified as one built on idealism *and* pragmatism. Obama is an idealist driven by the ambition to not just tinker with social problems, but to fundamentally transform the systemic failures of the American economic and political model. Although first an idealist, Obama must shape his ideas through pragmatism, a level of leadership requiring that his vision is molded by the possibilities provided by real circumstances. Obama's pragmatism and subsequent bipartisanship, although commendable, can result in defeat and the compromising of deep ideological beliefs. Bipartisanship of that nature reduces confidence in the leader and looks to the opposition for specters of renewed leadership. Obama's bipartisan strategy on the surface appears to have conformed to the belief that consensus is best in producing good governance. This "unity at all costs" posture, however, does not fit the nature of today's historic crises. As noted by historian Sam Haselby, bipartisanship obscures real

accomplishments and is more of an invented concept rather than reflective of *realpolitik*.<sup>37</sup> In times of crisis like the one plaguing the U.S., partisanship has had more success. Through the trauma of tough and divisive debate, partisanship helps to legitimize and delegitimize ideas, clarifies new ways of thinking about policy, and provides a new path forward. Such battles of ideas propel the country forward by sustaining democratic conversations, allowing for debates in which the public can discern bad suggestions from good. In contrast, bipartisan ideals promote unity with moderate agreements. Rather than agreeing to disagree, issues are compartmentalized at the expense of a more holistic approach. Obama's idealism has not come to fruition because it is being shaped by the confusion of trading pragmatism for bipartisanship. The two are not synonymous. Bipartisanship seeks to establish universality, whereas pragmatism looks for reasoned, practical consequences. Bipartisanship diffuses attention away from practical debate and strong advocacy for new ideas.

Moreover, when fresh ideas are marginalized through a strategy of too much give-and-take, policy becomes less concrete. The President's oblivious bipartisanism represses hope and faith in what could be achieved on a grand scale and diverts attention to what is easier to attain now. In essence, bipartisanism strips pragmatism of the need for strong propositions. Such cooptation dilutes the hope for bigger and longer-term results in favor of quick fixes, reducing the agenda of "change" to quid-pro-quo politicking. Furthermore, bipartisanism has no first principle, thus lacking a constructive repertoire from which to find guidance and justification. Stanley Fish, a humanist columnist for *The New York Times*, argues that Obama's ideal bipartisanship diminishes, if not "disqualifies [his] whole enterprise [of revamping the welfare state], at least in its more ambitious forms. What it leaves are the pleasures of thinking about thinking, freed from the burdensome expectation that we will finally get somewhere."<sup>38</sup> The President's cautious and sometimes overly methodical decision making often requires scaling down his own agenda to incorporate others at the cost of little or no results. When that power is submerged by a notion of bipartisanship, the public tends to retreat to the perception that all that can be done is to muddle through. When Obama is overly cautious, then Tea Partiers can easily convince the population to look for a source of leadership that is antithetical to his style and agenda.

## V. The Potential of Leadership

The circumstances that swept Mr. Obama into office were of a historic nature that cannot be overemphasized. He is the product of a crisis but will have to shape that crisis to yield great results. The conventional belief that crises produce singular individuals is credible in this instance. Judging by the magnitude of the problems the country faces, Obama's leadership will inevitably be seen in light of Thomas Carlyle's "Great Man Theory." The exercise of Machiavellian wisdom coupled with charisma and intelligence allow men of Obama's caliber to use power decisively in impacting history. His election was historically significant, but the euphoric hopes that it instigated—national unity, transformative change, the dawn of a new political consensus—seem to be waning. As argued in Judith Butler's "Uncritical Exuberance?," many on the Left risked believing that Obama's election was the political moment at which national unity would be embraced to overcome the antagonisms of today's political life.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Obama did fulfill the aspirations for racial representation in the nation.

President Obama also seemed to reconfigure a consensus on political goals. It was a "unity" in which one could apparently hold very discrepant views that disagreed with Obama's perspectives, but at the same time support him.<sup>40</sup> As argued here, that same civic optimism has not transferred

from campaigning to leading the country. The representative function of the presidency as a mixed marriage of racial unity has not lasted in the face of the Tea Party movement and widespread opposition to Obama's social democratic agenda. The opposition is rooted in the fact that Obama's health care reform seeks to broaden services that were once restricted by the private sphere. Endogenous to the Tea Partiers racialism is the lack of class consciousness of most Americans. Hence, Obama, for the most part, won the health care battle but bled enough political capital that he will ceaselessly have to fight the opposition in promoting his other domestic reforms.

The President's racial identity does present an interesting political opportunity that must not be understated. He has the rare ability to govern as a black president, whose historic presence is mistaken by Tea Partiers to be a statement of his policy priorities. Whereas Roosevelt's New Deal was largely seen to have benefited working-class whites, and Johnson's Great Society to assist African Americans, Obama's social policies, and more specifically health care reform, may be the first to merge the two constituencies beyond the racial perceptions of policy. He understands the plight of nonwhites because of his African American heritage. His leadership is also positioned in a time of urgency, one in which his social policies may have broad consequences in transforming and transcending class divisions. This uncanny potential can help President Obama succeed where his predecessors could not.

Moving forward, President Obama should try to model the Great Man paradigm. His leadership will have to utilize its quality of nobility to attain the greater good for everyone through a pragmatism that is even more audacious than what Obama is currently offering or imagined. He must also exude the courage to materialize the hope he promised through a civil Machiavellian control of power that neither corrupts nor compromises his principles and beliefs. (Machiavellian here refers specifically to the need to make others do as he wants, in addition to taking advantage of opportunities as they arise, averting challenges before they limit change, and confronting opponents impartially.) The political life of the times demands no greater leadership than that. However, Mr. Obama must still maintain caution so as not to disrespect opponents. Respect necessitates the cultivation of understanding his opponents' arguments. After all, the purpose is not power for power's sake, but the need to establish a stable political order that facilitates the achievement of a just society for everyone.

## NOTES

1. Henry Louis Gates, ed., *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
2. David Leonhardt, "In Health Bill, Obama Attacks Wealth Inequality," *New York Times* (March 2010).
3. David Leonhardt, "Obamanomics," *New York Times Magazine* (August 2009).
4. Consider Leonhardt's "Obamanomics" for an in-depth take on Obama's progressive, economically liberal philosophy and the role of government in the market.
5. David M. Herszenhorn, "A Grand Achievement, or a Lost Opportunity?," Congressional Memo. *New York Times* (24 March 2010).

6. David Brooks, "Getting Obama Right," *New York Times* (March 2010).
7. Eric Foner, "The Professional," *The Nation* (2010).
8. In Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, he points out that, "Reagan's central insight—that the liberal welfare state had gone complacent and overly bureaucratic, with Democratic policymakers more obsessed with slicing the economic pie than with growing that pie—contained a great deal of truth." Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).
9. Matt Bai, "Democrat in Chief," *New York Times* (June 2010).
10. Herszenhorn 2010.
11. Ibid.
12. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal: An African American Anthology* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), p. 630.
13. Gwen Ifill, *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama* (New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 2009).
14. Jennifer Steinhauer, "Black Hopefuls Pick This Year in G.O.P Races," *New York Times* (May 2010).
15. Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union: Two Speeches on Race that Changed America's Mind," *New York Review of Books* (2008).
16. Ifill 2009.
17. Steinhauer 2010.
18. Megan Thee-Brenan and Kate Zernike, "Poll Finds Tea Party Backers Wealthier and More Educated," *New York Times* (April 2010).
19. Accessed online at [whitehouse.gov/issues/service](http://whitehouse.gov/issues/service).
20. Kate Zernike, "Tea Party Avoids Divisive Social Issues," *New York Times* (March 2010).
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Thee-Brenan and Zernike 2010.

26. Ibid.

27. This individuality doctrine views collectivism as the sum of individual parts. Therefore, it is safe to say that the whole is not greater than the sum of its parts because it is the self-striving of each individual that collectivizes into an associated culture, eventually marking American nationhood—each to his/her own.

28. J. M. Bernstein, “The Very Angry Tea Party,” *New York Times* (13 June 2010).

29. Peter Baker, “Is President Obama Fulfilling Clinton’s Promise?,” *New York Times* (April 2010).

30. The Tea Party group believes in a system of private ownership in which Americans are presumed to be “self-owning,” and can use and dispose of capital on their own accord. In that system, government is presumed to be answerable to citizens and governs only with public consent, while remaining at most times detached from the citizenry unless given precise endorsement. All of this is encoded in an inherited individual possession of moral and natural rights that bind no one to institutional obligations unless he/she willingly chooses to take part in a societal enterprise.

31. Baker 2010.

32. Terry Boychuk, *The Making and Meaning of Hospital Policy in the United States and Canada* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

33. Orin Hatch, “Reconciliation on Healthcare would be an Assault to the Democratic Process,” *Washington Post* (March 2010).

34. Ibid.

35. Boychuk 1999.

36. A. Henry Giroux, “The Disappearing Intellectual in the Age of Economic Darwinism” (12 July 2010), accessed online at Truth-out.org.

37. Sam Haselby, “Divided We Stand: The Problem with Bipartisanship,” *The Boston Globe* (23 March 2009).

38. Stanley Fish, “Pragmatism’s Gift,” *New York Times Opinionator* (March 2010).

39. Judith Butler, "Uncritical Exuberance," accessed online at [angrywhitekid.blogs.com/weblog/2008/11/uncritical-exuberance-judith-butlers-take-on-obama.html](http://angrywhitekid.blogs.com/weblog/2008/11/uncritical-exuberance-judith-butlers-take-on-obama.html).

40. Ibid.

## **Bibliography**

Abramsky, Sasha. *Inside Obama's Brain*. New York: Portfolio, 2009.

Baker, Peter. "No Walk in the Park for Obama One Year Later, It's the Slog of Governance." *New York Times*. 2009.

Blyth, Mark. *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Boychuk, Terry. *The Making and Meaning of Hospital Policy in the United States and Canada*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Brooks, David. "Getting Obama Right/Where Does Obama Stand." *New York Times*. 2010.

Butler, Judith. "Uncritical Exuberance." Accessed online at [angrywhitekid.blogs.com/weblog/2008/11/uncritical-exuberance-judith-butlers-take-on-obama.html](http://angrywhitekid.blogs.com/weblog/2008/11/uncritical-exuberance-judith-butlers-take-on-obama.html).

Calmes, Jackie. "Obama Plans Major Shift in Spending." *New York Times*. February 2009.

Fish, Stanley. "The Gift of Pragmatism." *New York Times Opinionator*. March 2010.

Foner, Eric. *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2002.

———. "The Professional." *The Nation*. 2010.

Haselby, Sam. "Divided We Stand: The Problem with Bipartisanship." *The Boston Globe*. 23 March 2009.

Ifill, Gwen. *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama*. New York: Doubleday, 2009.

*Prince: A Manual of Leadership*. London: Saqi, 2003.

Leonhardt, David. "The Big Fix." *New York Times*. January 2009. Accessed online at [nytimes.com/2009/02/01/magazine/01Economy-t.html](http://nytimes.com/2009/02/01/magazine/01Economy-t.html).

. *The Just*

———. “A Bold Plan Sweeps Away Reagan Ideas.” *New York Times*. 26 February 2009.

Marable, Manning, and Leith Mullings. *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal: An African American Anthology*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.

Matthews, T. Jessica. “Solid and Promising.” *The American Interest Online*. 2009.

Obama, Barack. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2006.

Sanger, E. David. “Great Society Plan for the Middle Class.” *New York Times*. February 2009.

Zernike, Kate. “With No Jobs, Plenty of Time for Tea Party.” *New York Times*. March 2010.