

6.2 James Kloppenberg (2012) *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope and the American Tradition* [paperback with new preface; hardback (2011)]

Detailed Review

This Resource's Key Interpretations and Insights Related to the Purposes of This Website

(1) This book provides **the only detailed explanation of why President Obama operates politically the way he does**. Kloppenberg shows how his upbringing, education and experiences have shaped **his style of political initiative, interaction and decision making, which is unique in today's radically polarized American politics**. Since he is an historian of ideas, Kloppenberg is very well situated to **illuminate the deep historical foundation of Obama's perspective on healthy and unhealthy American politics**.

(2) Kloppenberg shows **why Obama is neither a dangerous leftist extremist (the common misinterpretation on the right) nor the unprincipled, too-quick-to-compromise loser (the unfair interpretation on the left)**. In the upcoming 2012 election, will Obama's very different style of leadership lead to a healthier kind of American politics with his reelection or will it be rejected largely because it's been misunderstood? Kloppenberg hopes his book will help lead to the former outcome.

(1) (see above)

As you can see from the list of chapters (right), Kloppenberg divides the heart of his text into three long chapters (which are quite detailed) and a conclusion. Although as an academic his primary purpose was to fill a large gap in the literature on Obama at that time, he also wanted the general public to better understand this man he admires. And even more, I believe **he hopes the book can make a contribution to Obama's reelection in 2012, because he sees his particular way of using various forms of political power as a recovery of a long-neglected tradition in American politics that would be healthy for our nation to recover**.

Chapters

Preface to the Paperback Edition

Introduction

1. The Education of Barack Obama
2. From Universalism to Particularism
3. Obama's American History
4. Conclusion: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition

Kloppenberg is Professor of American History at Harvard. He believes one cannot really grasp why Obama acts politically the way he does **without understanding the various strands of certain intellectual traditions and their complex interrelationships, as Obama see them, that have shaped his entire worldview**. He sees his book as **the first attempt to locate Obama's ideas in the context of American philosophical, social and political thought**. It was the intense interest in Obama by the Brits when he was teaching a class in American intellectual history at the University of Cambridge in 2008 that led him to explore the topic more completely and eventually led to this book.

Kloppenberg says "the modest aim of this little book" is to see Obama's ideas within **the matrix** of his personal history and American history and thought. (xxxvii) For him, the concrete way Obama combines those two elements formed his identity and helped raise him to the pinnacle of American political power. **But how does Obama understand and employ various forms of power?** And when and where did he learn and practice them? These are just some of the key insights this book seeks to offer.

In my opinion, Kloppenberg's book is now, and will remain, the definitive account of Obama's intellectual history.

Kloppenberg believes that **a significant part of understanding Obama is seeing that he is "a man of ideas,"** a topic that's not received enough attention. This places him in the company of only a few of our most important presidents, e.g., John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. (xxxvii-xxxviii) However, Kloppenberg points out **it's just as important that he is also a "shrewd and savvy politician."** **Just where do those two important traits come from and how are they combined to make Obama such an atypical president?** Kloppenberg shows us. One of

my favorite Kloppenberg phrases that captures this special synthesis is **“intelligence and caginess are not mutually exclusive.”** (x1) Yes, but they’re not both embodied in politically effective ways in many of our presidents.

Kloppenberg begins his first chapter with Obama’s statement on the night he was elected that **our nation’s greatest strength is “the enduring power of our ideals.”** (1) He returns full circle on the last page of his book with the same Obama quote about the power of American ideals, and thus we can say **Obama’s deep commitment to particular forms of American idealism frames Kloppenberg’s interpretation of him.** (265)

In large part it’s the primacy of this idealism that makes Obama, in my terms, a realistic idealist (a center-left person) rather than a idealistic realist (a center-right person).

Obama’s long spiritual/cultural/racial/political journey on the way to a presidency based on historic American ideals was one of seeking deep roots so that he could confidently embrace who he is and stand tall when acting his calling. Kloppenberg says he found a powerful symbol of this in a unexpected way in Kenya--**Africa’s baobab trees** (see the picture below of one of these trees that look so strange to American eyes I took on a brief mission trip to Kenya in 1990). Kloppenberg says it was their “odd, cartoonish shapes and their unpredictable patterns of dormancy and flowering” (263) that **gave Obama a way to remember his own rootedness in the personal and professional traditions he had worked so hard all those years to discover and integrate into his life.** On that same page Kloppenberg quotes this passage toward the end of Obama’s *Dreams From My Father* memoir:



Quote

“They both disturbed and comforted me...those trees looked as if they might uproot themselves and simply walk away, were it not for the knowledge that on this earth one place is not so different from another--the knowledge that one moment carries within it all that’s gone on before.”

One of the great values of Kloppenberg’s book is that he correctly grasps how and why Obama’s complex identity is so strange to many Americans that it’s like looking at a baobab tree for the first time. For Kloppenberg, one key reason is that Obama **“amalgamated American traditions usually--but incorrectly--thought to be distinct.”** (263)

(Kloppenberg uses a number of technical academic terms, but does a great job of explaining their meanings in ordinary language. I agree with him that it’s important for you to know something about them.)

(It’s also important for me to say that I will only be able to touch the tip of the iceberg of the rich and detailed information supplied in this text about the historical context of Obama’s ideas and ideals.)

For Kloppenberg, Obama’s books *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* are the most substantial books written by a president since Woodrow Wilson. (5) A great deal of Kloppenberg’s book is his take on the content of these books and of his major speeches--hence his title *Reading Obama*.

**Obama’s books--
the most substantial from a president
since Woodrow Wilson**

Obama’s undergraduate work was at two of America’s best colleges, Occidental and Columbia. His graduate studies led to a law degree from Harvard, one of the best law schools in the country. Later he taught constitutional law for over a decade at the University of Chicago, another top law school. His books reveal he is a genuine intellectual as well as a skilled politician. Kloppenberg believes his personal story in *Dreams* needs to be seen in the context of his ideas and ideals described in *Audacity* if one wants to grasp accurately his views on American culture and politics. (151-3)

According to Kloppenberg, these American intellectual movements have most influenced Obama’s worldview:

(A) **civic republicanism, communitarianism and deliberative democracy** (going back to our nation’s founders)

(B) **the Progressive political movement and philosophical pragmatism** (going back to the early 20th century)

and (C) **the anti-foundational, historicist understandings of human knowledge** (especially as developed during the late 20th century)

(A) **civic republicanism, communitarianism and deliberative democracy** (going back to our nation's founders)

Kloppenber begins by noting that Obama is **grounded in “the venerable traditions of American democracy: respect for one’s opponents and willingness to compromise with them.”** (2) This started with his mother and her parents. Academically, its roots were in high school in Hawaii, where the mixed-race Obama became intensely interested in the best African American writers. Ralph Ellison who especially taught him to honor “the principle”--**the ideals of freedom and equality present from the beginning of the nation**--even if it had constantly failed African Americans. Ellison and others argued that “the principle” could be redeemed only if African Americans would transcend hatred and continue to work for it. (14-15) Then Obama decided to study political philosophy at Occidental College, because he said he was “**looking for both a language and systems of action that could help build community and make justice real.**” (my emphasis) From Occidental political scientist Roger Boesche he got his basic grounding in American political history and thought, including his first contact with **Reinhold Niebuhr**, the Christian realist who became one of the most important influences on his thought. (16-17) It was also at Occidental where he discovered to his surprise he could move people with his words during his first experience with political activism. (20-21)

Useful Link

Soon I'll be reviewing an excellent resource for understanding Reinhold Niebuhr's influence on Obama, "[Obama's Theologian: David Brooks and E.J. Dionne on Reinhold Niebuhr and the American Present](#)," an 83-minute video of a dialogue mediated by Krista Tippett at the Berkley Center, Georgetown University, August 13, 2009. (Click on title for link.)

After graduating from Columbia University, he decided not to follow the normal path of upward mobility and became a community organizer in Chicago. Part of his motivation was from American history, especially what he learned from founder James Madison in the *Federalist Papers* and Tocqueville's early 19th century *Democracy in America*. They emphasized **democracy works only when citizens create local associations and political strategies to transform self-interest into the public good**. Democracy thus involved cultural and communal as well as political and economic components.

Another powerful part of his motivation was theological. He arrived in Chicago to start the community developing phase of his life with a mantra he learned from Martin Luther King, Jr.: **“Love without power is mere sentimentality. Power without love is dangerous. Love plus power equals justice.”** (26) (*Obviously, this concept of power is quite different from the widely accepted view that power, by definition, equals dominating force.*)

Kloppenber does a good job of recognizing the importance of mid-20th century Christian realism for Obama. But from my perspective Obama himself has not realized the additional potential benefits for his center-left political stance of postmodern Christian theology as it has developed since King and Niebuhr.

(See my reviews of 5.1 Toulouse (2006) and 5.2 Pasewark & Paul (1999) for my position.

He was seeking to learn how to put the two Christian realist conceptions of power, one from King and the another from Niebuhr, into practice. At this point, these were just intellectual principles. But by the time he left Chicago he had experienced them in deeply life-transforming ways both personally in a concrete Christian community (for the first time in his life) and professionally as he discovered the new skills it took to empower others in a local justice-seeking community association.

However, the roadblocks he encountered from legal and political power structures were so frustrating that he felt he needed to attend law school to learn about all those business and political aspects of society that would teach him **“power’s currency in all its intricacy and detail.”** What he learned about law eventually led him to enter politics. (36) Here was the profession where he could use everything he had learned to that point to help remove some of the roadblocks to justice he had experienced and also provide a much-needed new vision for a healthier nation.

When Obama entered graduate school the Reagan revolution had already moved the Supreme Court to the right and conservative legal scholars were “flexing their muscles” in various ways, especially arguing for **an interpretation of the Constitution called “original intent.”** This interpretation saw the Constitution as a repository of timeless truths that could

My Take

(and some coming reviews)

As I see it, Kloppenberg (even though he doesn't put it this way) shows us how Obama came to understand the different kinds of power that were the most healthy to use in different dimensions of faith and politics:

- the necessarily collaborative and compromising power used in governing
- the Chicago-style hardball power used in campaigning to be in a position to govern
- living “the principle” power in race relations
- Christian realist power in religious influence on politics
- Just War theory power in war

*(Note: Kloppenberg provides a detailed examination of **three of Obama's most important speeches** in his description of the subjects in the last three bullets, above. Since **I'll be reviewing each of those speeches soon**, I'm choosing to save space in this review by not saying much about Kloppenberg's interpretation.*

be tools for overturning FDR's New Deal, which ironically before that time had been largely accepted by moderate Republican presidents and legislators as settled, well established law, popular with the American public.

Obama entered Harvard Law School in 1988, right in the midst of intense debates about the nature of the law. On one extreme were the “original intent” radicals on the Right (above), and on the other were radical Leftist European critics who saw all law as merely a tool used by those in power to oppress others. Obama learned the most from progressives on the Harvard faculty who were influenced by clusters of ideas from the fields of political theory and American history, known academically as **civic republicanism, communitarianism and deliberative democracy**. They were committed to a concept of “a shared common good” that stood in between the positions of the radical Right and Left in the debates of the time. (41)

Academic history had already been transformed by one of the most influential books of the last half of the 20th century, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, by Gordon Wood (see quote, right). Progressive law professors began to recover what they called “republican values” from the scholarship on the 18th century founders--especially the founders' emphasis on virtue being compatible with the classic liberal emphasis on freedom. And even more, they believed that **without governmental restraint on individual freedom, liberty would quickly be reduced to a greedy rush for wealth and great inequality.** (44-45) It's interesting to note that Obama's colleagues in law school with whom he developed close ties at that time included Elena Kagan, his second presidential Supreme Court nominee, and Martha Nussbaum (several of whose writings will be reviewed on this website). (70)

Quote

Wood said the founders of the U.S. “were animated by a passion for civic virtue as well as liberty. They not only sought independence from Britain to establish freedom for individuals; in addition, they prized equality and justice as the ends of government, and they framed the United States Constitution for that purpose.” (42)

During his first year Obama was a research assistant to liberal law professor Laurence Tribe. Tribe argued in a famous 1989 article “The Curvature of Constitutional Space: What Lawyers Can Learn from Modern Physics” (assisted by Obama) that **“the fundamental fairness of a society is best judged by an examination of its treatment of the least advantages.”** This argument was grounded in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as well as the writings of the most prominent political philosopher of the late 20th century, John Rawls. (59) Tribe credits Obama for helping him see **the Constitution as a “conversation,” a never-ending interpretive process of the nation arguing with its conscience, rather than a fixed, unchanging document.** In 1991 Tribe wrote *On Reading the Constitution* with Michael Dorf, challenging both extremes of unrestrained judicial activism on the Left and pure judicial restraint on the Right. (61-2)

During Obama's term as president of the prestigious Harvard Law Review, he gained the respect of conservative students, even though he was clearly seen as **“a man of the Left.”** (51) However, Kloppenberg sees (and this is crucial) that this

Obama's gift for conciliation rests on his principled commitments

gift for conciliation is more deeply grounded than merely in his temperament. It rests on his principled stances. Here is the basis for **Obama's commitment to civility in political debate** and **his frequent statements of the principle that "what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart."** (180-81)

Although there are many sources of Obama's **communitarian ideals**, one common thread in the writings of the communitarians--center-right as well as the center-left--who influenced him is that **individual rights must be balanced by responsibility for the health of the public sphere, or the common good.** For them, this has been the key to the health of our democracy since the American Revolution and its recovery crucial in our time of **extremist individualism in its different forms on the Right and the Left.** (73-78)

Kloppenbergs also sees clearly that Obama's commitment to American ideals is balanced by his realism (in my terms, he is **a realistic idealist**). Obama found this to be an essential part of **the founders** understanding. They were Deists who, while they didn't believe in original sin in a religious sense, clearly **saw a basic human flaw in self-centeredness that had to be factored in to the political structures they were creating.** Although Obama did see this human flaw in a **Christian** realist religious way, he wanted to know "how power operates" in all areas of life, including secular contexts. He said **"What I'm constantly trying to do is balance a hard head with a big heart."** (94-95)

Part of this realism was seeing that **the founders gave us a unique form of democracy based on deliberation as the method for making wise political decisions at any particular place and time;** such decisions couldn't be made in advance or for all time. The quote (left) captures the essence of Kloppenberg's insight. Obama referenced Alexander Hamilton in *Federalist* number 70 on the benefits of the "jarring of parties" in the process of deliberation. Like many scholars of the Constitution he understands it to be "cobbled together" from intense passionate debates. There is **no original unitary intent, as claimed by conservatives.** Rather, it embodies compromises made by proponents of many different, competing sources. And it's a living document through the process of amendment, which it itself had institutionalized. For Obama, this should help us see that **every invocation of high principle needs to be seen as just as contingent--and in need of taking seriously the advocates of other principle--as in the creation of our originating document.**

Quote

"The process of deliberation, particularly when it brought together people with diverse backgrounds, convictions and aspirations, made possible a metamorphosis unavailable through any other form of decision making. People who saw the world through very different lenses could help each other see more clearly." (159)

So it's the Constitution that gave birth to deliberative democracy, and it's a model for how new understandings of the common good, which are always necessary to meet new challenges, emerge. (159-62)

Finally, on last pages of the book, Kloppenberg, looking back over his text, says that Obama combines a surprising number of basic themes of the American political tradition, especially the form that tradition has taken over the last 50 years. Obama knows that **all ideals, even the ones he holds dear, are not only contested but are changing constantly. They are never fixed for all time.** Kloppenberg's final sentences are worth quoting in full (below).

These sentences spell out some of what Kloppenberg means when he says **Obama operates politically in a more egalitarian way with respect to his ideal goals and in a more moderate way with respect to the means he uses to achieve them.** For me, this is an openness to change time-honored principles (healthy adjustments to outdated **ideologies**) by the healthy use of **utopian visions** of truth, justice and beauty. A healthy use of the latter means finding realistic ways (what's possible at a particular time and place with the means at hand) to make significant, if limited, steps to heal our broken world. Kloppenberg says it's "Obama's tenacious hope" that such changes are not beyond human capacities. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Obama quoted Martin Luther King, Jr.'s brilliant encapsulation of this hopeful vision: **"Our actions matter, and can bend history in the direction of justice."** (260)

Quote

"Obama understands that the power of our principles of liberty and equality depends not on the fervor with which they are proclaimed but on the deliberative process from which they have developed. That process requires us to debate, test, and revise the meaning of our ideals in practice rather than genuflecting reverentially before them. Only when we affirm the process of continuous and open-ended experimentation do we affirm the principle of democracy." (265)

Useful Link (coming soon)

My understanding of ideology and utopia in the last paragraph comes from *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. **He sees a dialectical relationship between the two and also thinks they have both positive and negative forms.** This is quite different from how we usually hear these terms being used only in a negative sense in everyday conversation. I'll be reviewing this resource soon in Section 5 *In-Depth Scholarly Resources*.

Having said this about Obama's basically hopeful stance, it's important to note (as Kloppenberg points out) **this doesn't mean that he doesn't also see a tragic side to political decisions**, even ones that he promotes and/or are seen a positive movements of healthy change. There are always unexpected consequences; and sometimes even when tragic consequences are clearly seen at the outset, it's necessary to go ahead and act. For example, a number of times Kloppenberg brings this up in regard to Obama's great respect for Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's actions concerning slavery during the Civil War and even the decision to go to war to save the union itself were prime examples of the kind of tragedy that results when positive values are in conflict. Kloppenberg says, in a penetrating turn of phrase, that **Obama's clear grasp of this tragic dimension of human life distances him from Americans "who believe that a bright line connects their moral commitments to their political judgments."** (250)

Let me bring this section to a close by giving an example of how deliberative democracy played out in the most important achievement of Obama's first term. Kloppenberg devotes five pages to showing **why Obama's actions during the long debates over health care were not what critics took to be weakness or a total lack of understanding of the coercive power a president must use to get a bill passed.** Kloppenberg's interpretation of the details is fascinating. He argues that (1) Obama's neutralizing of the health insurance and pharmaceutical industries with initial compromises that took their powerful lobbies out of play even before the process began and (2) his not threatening to veto any bill that didn't contain a public option were **part of a realistic strategy to get the best possible bill passed. If politics is the art of the possible, then Kloppenberg sees Obama as a skillful artist in the health care debate.** Obama certainly knew that the bill was flawed and would need to be revised in a number of areas. However, to make a bill better, there has to be a bill passed in the first place, and for 70 years presidents of both parties have been unable to pass even a starter bill on this primary justice issue. (165-9) (For a contrasting, more critical evaluation of Obama seen from a different view of what was possible for him during the struggles over health care, see my review of Gary Dorrien's *The Obama Question* on page 6.1 on the website.)

(B) **the Progressive political movement and philosophical pragmatism** (going back to the early 20th centuries)

Kloppenber says **Obama's writings and speeches lay out a considered story of American history in which progressives demand justice and challenge abuses of power.** (xii) During the early 20th century a variety of reform movements came into being: progressivism (solidly established politically by Republican Theodore Roosevelt), social democracy and the new liberalism. (It's important to note that many conservative counter philosophies and political movements rose to challenge them, which I'm not detailing).

Useful Link

Soon I will be reviewing a video series of a college-level course that comprehensively covers the various large shifts in political movements in American history. One of the most important shifts was the Progressive movement in the early 20th century. Why did it arise? How did it create new meanings for the political terms "conservative" and "liberal" still with us today? This resource is Joseph Kobylika (2006) *Cycles of American Political Thought* (Audio or Video with Course Guidebook). Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company.

I believe this course gives us the historical context both to understand the extremely dangerous asymmetric polarization currently immobilizing our political system and to have the common sense to help do something about it (the main purpose of this website).

Obama was influenced by progressive ideas of (1) graduated taxation and (2) the necessity of regulation of the economy by the government, which were embraced by Democrats from Woodrow Wilson to LBJ. Inequality shrank under FDR's

New Deal and continued up until 1974. Kloppenberg says the causes of this growing relative equality was the two deliberate strategies just mentioned plus (3) support for unionization and (4) massive investment in higher education. There was a long tradition beginning with the founding fathers that our democracy could only succeed if citizens were roughly equal economically. (183-87)

The fundamental continuity between Obama's vision of helping America move closer to its original ideals and the rich history of the Progressive movement can be seen in a Kloppenberg quote (below). **This is also precisely why those on the extreme Right who are against everything except individual freedom are doing everything they can to kill that vision before it can take hold as a decisive political transformation. Reagan's hyperbolic statement that "government is the problem" is now taken literally as an absolute norm to reduce government to next to nothing.**

Quote

In *The Audacity of Hope* Obama listed the concerns he heard from the public when he was campaigning for the Senate in 2002. He found that they were essentially the same as FDR's idea for a Second Bill of Rights six decades before. These were hopes for "a living wage, health insurance, good schools, safety from criminals at home and enemies abroad, a clean environment, 'time with their kids,' and 'a chance to retire with some dignity and respect.'" (187)

Early pragmatist philosophers like William James and John Dewey were basically allied with the political reform movements. They challenged all fixed truths and dogmas with a call to open inquiry and experimentation; truths would always be in flux when new realities arose needing to be accounted for. (110-11) This connection can be seen in the names chosen for the dramatic changes in political policies like FDR's "New Deal" and LBJ's "Great Society."

In his introduction, Kloppenberg makes an important distinction for anyone who wants to understand why a common criticism of Obama is unfair. **Many call Obama a "pragmatist" in a derogatory sense and judge his commitment to compromise as just "an unprincipled politician's weakness for the path of least resistance."** For Kloppenberg, that just exemplifies a viewpoint he calls **"vulgar pragmatism,"** which he contrasts with the philosophical pragmatism influencing Obama. The latter is a philosophy that challenges all absolute claims, whether in philosophy, religion or science. In this sense, it's a philosophy for skeptics; (xxxiii-xxxv) and is the basic meaning behind Obama's calling himself "a Christian and a skeptic," which on its face sounds contradictory. It's really not, if one sees his use of the term "skeptic" doesn't mean questioning everything but rather questioning all absolutes (as in anti-foundationalism discussed in section C, below).

If one understands this kind of skepticism in philosophical pragmatism, it become obvious how it dovetails with deliberative democracy (discussed in section A, above), leading to a commitment to democratic debate and holding all political decision up for close examination. **It stands over against the politics of true believers, who think they already know what needs to be done without hearing about other views or experience-tested facts.** Kloppenberg is well aware that, in our time of polarized true believers, this may be a detriment to Obama's being able to persuade and inspire people to support his ideals and policies. (xxxv) However, **I believe Obama has a much better chance if people understand the principled nature of how he approaches politics and power, which is precisely why Kloppenberg's book is so important.**

Kloppenberg is correct that American pragmatism is the philosophy which has influenced Obama the most.

In my opinion, the thought of Paul Ricoeur would be an even better philosophical grounding for Obama's center-left faith and politics. It has similar realist concerns about dangerous absolutism in both faith and politics as well as a similar, more primary, idealism that motivates us to work for a better, more just world. And for me, it has better ways of integrating these two dimensions while addressing issues of truth in our postmodern context. (See my brief description of his philosophy in Section 1.3 of the website. Reviews of some of his books are coming soon.)

Kloppenberg gives a detailed examination of the history of philosophical pragmatism. Here are a few key elements (see the next section also). The best known founders of this movement are William James and John Dewey. Kloppenberg quotes a later pragmatist, Richard Rorty, who says that James and Dewey promoted "a spirit of social hope" at the same time that they called for dropping "the neurotic Cartesian quest for certainty." To his mind, this was in sharp contrast to

the pessimism of the influential European philosophers Nietzsche and Heidegger. (130) For Kloppenberg, it's Richard Bernstein's later pragmatic philosophy that is reflected most in Obama's writings, most importantly his commitment to **"fallibilism,"** where all knowledge is provisional and open to revision based on experimenting with alternatives. (133)

Many of Obama's critics fail to understand his principled stance against modern concepts of absolute knowledge, which has such a large effect on his way of governing. In my terms, this means he is a **"postmodern" thinker.** (see 1.2 on the website)

Kloppenberg acknowledges that philosophical pragmatism certainly didn't end absolutist views in American analytic philosophy and mainstream social science, which it criticized heavily. (137) However, it was very influential on many important streams of late 20th and early 21st century intellectual life important for Obama.

(C) **the anti-foundational, historicist understandings of human knowledge** (especially as developed during the late 20th century)

American social thought since the mid-20th century can be pictured as a struggle between foundationalist who thought truth was universal and unchanging across time and cultures, on the one hand, and pluralists and historicists, on the other. For the former, there are many competing positions on truth in all disciplines, and there is no way to prove the absolute truth of one over the others. For the latter, one must understand all truth claims are historically contextual. Obama's views were shaped by the historicist side of the debate.

The implication of this for Obama was that competing parties or groups need to enter into conversation with each other, and in the process of trying to persuade, hopefully an "overlapping consensus" (John Rawls' phrase) (108) would develop that acknowledges the continuing, necessary existence of incompatible "comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrine." How foreign is this in today's hyper-polarized world? **Isn't it relativistic--any position is just as true as any other?** Yet it's precisely the search for "overlapping consensus" in it's fullest, principled sense which illumines Obama's style of governing. So is he a relativist?

Two very important books central to the decline of universalism and foundationalism were historian of science Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) and cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1971). The former challenged ideas of timeless, universal truth with the explanatory concept of "paradigm shifts" to illumine the history of science. The latter denied that social science could come up with universal laws of human behavior across cultures. Geertz used a telling story from an experience he had in India to explain. When a Hindu told him that the world rested on a turtle and it rested on another turtle, he asked him what that turtle rested on. He received this reply. "Ah, Sahib, **it's turtles all the way down.**" Kloppenberg says that phrase was used repeatedly as a kind of shorthand in American life for over 25 years. For Geertz, scholars who sought certainty were destined to find only stories and beneath those only more stories--**there is no foundation.** (123-26)

**"It's turtles all the way down."
Or maybe, not so fast.**

It's important to note that **even more radical critics** of modern concepts of knowledge emerged who challenged rationality itself, either in the name of an **all-encompassing relativism** or a reduction of reason to being merely the tools of dominating power elites. (127) In response, Kuhn and Geertz drew back from the relativistic implications of their denunciations of modern natural and social science. Also, two American pragmatists of the late 20th century, Richard Bernstein and Hillary Putnam, responded by developing centrist positions. (131-32, 134-35) They argued for **philosophical stances that stood over against both the relativistic extreme of giving up on the very possibility of rational discussion and the absolutist extreme of those who sought to impose various religious and secular notions of universal truth on others.** Obama embraced these centrist stances. **He's not a relativist.**

Obama rejected relativistic views in several fields important to him. For one, some radical race theorists claimed white domination was so ingrained it was useless to try to change it, which upset more activist-oriented African Americans, including Obama, who were seeking ways to change things. (127) Another was in the context of Obama's study of the Constitution. Kloppenberg says he resisted mightily interpretations of our founding document that saw it as, in Geertz's phrase, "turtles all the way down." For Obama such views were just **the freedom of the relativist or rule breaker.** (161) He would eventually find a more moderate historicist, not relativist, way to understand its flexibility, namely that its openness to revision in order to meet new challenges was structurally designed right into the document itself by the founders.

In his conclusion, Kloppenberg first retraces Obama's life journey through the many cultures he experienced--national, racial, familial and academic. He then uses this multi-cultural journey to show how it grounds Obama's confident commitment to a particular way of viewing tradition and change. He has "a nuanced understanding" of the difference between dogmatically holding on to a tradition regardless of consequences (a negative kind of ideology, in my terms) and having the flexibility to make adjustments to honored traditions when new circumstances call for it (a positive kind of ideology, in my terms). (260)

This describes his personal journey as well as his professional one. In *Dreams*, Obama describes the America of the mid-20th century--the world he was born into--as a period when many, if not most, people just assumed "the triumph of universalism over parochialism and narrow mindedness." He later came to see how his maternal grandparents, who had played such a big role in his childhood, embodied this "rosy optimism" of the post-WWII era (the era of my childhood, by the way) and seemed to wear the common cultural blinders of many whites of the period. They saw themselves as free of prejudice, especially when their daughter married an African. (86) Obama grew up grounded in that optimism. While he grew to be critical of it, he never turned his back on its many positive aspects. He merely deepened it with profoundly realistic elements--**he's his own baobab tree.**

Obama is his own
baobab tree.

(2) Kloppenberg shows **why Obama is neither the dangerous leftist extremist (the common misinterpretation on the right) nor the unprincipled, too-quick-to-compromise loser (the unfair interpretation on the left).** In the upcoming 2012 election, will Obama's very different style of leadership lead to a healthier kind of American politics with his reelection or will it be rejected largely because it's been misunderstood? Kloppenberg hopes his book will help lead to the former outcome.

There's plenty of room for legitimate, respectful criticisms of Obama's political positions and methods by those who have different politics based on other principles. To me, what Kloppenberg wants to counter are the many criticisms that seem unfair--**some appear to be blinded, or just plain hateful, because of their own ideology; some seem seriously skewed by misunderstandings of his principles and their respectable historical roots; and some have highly unrealistic expectations of what's possible for him to accomplish given the nature of the challenges he faces.** (See my *Highlights Review of 6.1 Dorrien [2012]* for the most complete account and refutation of the most blatant misrepresentations of Obama.)

Kloppenberg believes that a big part of the reason why there's so much unfair criticism of Obama from all parts of the political spectrum is that **it's difficult to place him in the simple, conventional categories of Left and Right.** (xxv) **In my terms, as a centrist, he combines some of what purely conservative ideologies value into his basically liberal ideology, which synergizes both into a new centrist unity--in his case on the center-left part of the ideological spectrum.** This perplexes purists of both Right and Left.

For example, his very important principled center-left synergistic combination of freedom and equality are often misunderstood. On the one hand, he is committed to individual responsibility (valued highly by conservatives) such as **parents having the primary responsibility to raise their children**, which makes liberals suspicious of his progressive credentials. And, on the other hand, he is even more deeply committed to communal responsibility (so liberals relax somewhat) such as **all of us being responsible to help those who can't help themselves that must happen through our government to be effective**, which makes today's conservatives go overboard and call him a socialist. (101-02)

Kloppenberg corrects **those frequent, totally misplaced charges from the extreme Right that Obama is a "socialist"** just because he proposes dealing with the serious and growing inequality of the last 30 years by having the most well-to-do Americans contribute more of a fair share. He points out that **Obama is merely trying to renew the venerable American tradition of "egalitarianism" within our capitalist system, which he fully accepts.** This is historically backed up by a long string of respected Americans from the founders up to the modern times who have promoted similar policies. Obama insists that only when we recover this earlier American ideal of "justice as fairness" will we be a healthier nation. (194-95)

Only from the farthest reaches
of the extreme Right can
Obama appear to be a socialist.

There has also been a flood of criticism from the Left since the middle of 2011 accusing him of being "weak" and not "fighting" for his policies. Kloppenberg shows his disgust with this when he tersely says, **"Many of Obama's critics on the left competed in a protracted disillusionment sweepstakes, vying to demonstrate who among them was the most deeply disappointed."** (xx) Ouch! Kloppenberg has also be surprised by the

cynicism of many scholars who have discounted Obama's intelligence. Certainly anti-intellectualism has a long tradition in America, but scholars shouldn't be reinforcing it in our present Tea Party climate. (xxiii)

Some on the Left are calling Obama weak because they don't understand Obama's principled commitment to cooperative deliberation and acceptable compromise--the rich American tradition he is trying to renew. **They share the widespread belief in our culture that politicians must fight for decisive victories over their opponents using all the coercive tools at their disposal.** (179) Naturally, if this is their only frame of reference, they're bound to see Obama as a wishy-washy, weak leader.

There's more than one way to stand up for ("fight") for your principles.

Other liberals understand why Obama governs the way he does, **but believe he could have done much more to accomplish his goals that were also extremely important to them.** Kloppenberg responds that **in most instances they were not realistic about what was really possible for Obama to accomplish.** Of course, these kinds of criticisms are judgment calls in which knowledgeable people will

differ. Kloppenberg himself says that close readers of Obama's writings had cause to expect that he would have moved much more aggressively in some areas, especially economic inequality. (xi) He was also critical of Obama's decision to send more troops to Afghanistan. (236) However, to those who criticize many other specific things Obama has not been able to accomplish, he replied that **the "advice to get tough rested on Hollywood fantasies of presidential power."** (xix) (*See my Highlights Review of 6.1 Dorrien [2012] for this critique of some of the most prominent progressive critics of Obama. However, from my perspective, Dorrien is also unrealistic in some of his evaluations of Obama's actions. I'm closer to Kloppenberg in this regard.*)

A fitting conclusion to this section is the telling example Kloppenberg gives of Obama standing strong in his centrist position during the withering criticisms of his handling of the Jeremiah Wright controversy. **Critics on the Left "excoriated him for abandoning Wright."** For example, Obrey Hendricks, Jr., called it "a humiliating public betrayal." **Critics on the Right "charged that he had excused Wright's anti-Americanism and thrown America under the bus."** (213)

Actually, if they had been listening carefully, Kloppenberg says, **those on the Left would have seen that Obama was giving principled reasons for his distancing himself from his still honored mentor.** Wright was betraying two principles Obama held dear: democracy and historicism. American democracy can and does change, and it had done so with respect to race. It still had a long way to go, but Wright had a view of white racism that was stuck in the past. **Critics on the Right should have taken to heart Obama's perspective on what struggling whites needed to see as the true source of their problems.** It was not other races but rather **(1) a corporate culture rife with morally bankrupt short-term greed and illegal insider trading and (2) a political culture controlled by lobbyists and special interests whose big contributions resulted in political decisions favoring a few rather than the common good.** (212-13) Will more struggling whites finally see things this way in the 2012 election? Kloppenberg knows most of Obama's most hateful critics don't openly say they're racist. But Kloppenberg believes that many of them are just that. (xv) (*As do I.*)

The best speech (ever?) on race in America for the healing of our nation.

This example from Obama's speech on race shows how his methodology of governing is principled and strong, not wishy-washy and weak. For him **policy**, especially policy that he is deeply committed to, **should be pursued** not with "swaggering certainty" but **with a deep humility.** (261) Such humility is rooted in many different traditions--secular as well as religious--but for Obama it is grounded in Christian virtue and American civil republicanism. It is the kind of humility that knows **"all sides of every controversy, including his own, are inevitably flawed."** Kloppenberg points out that Obama puts it this way in his *Dreams* book: **everyone needs to "embrace our teeming, colliding, irksome diversity, while still insisting on a set of values that binds us together."** For Obama that set of values, in addition to **freedom and equality**, include **a deep commitment to the democratic values of the toleration of differences and the fruitfulness of compromise.** (261) This principled kind of compromise is required in a democracy. It's not wishy-washy or lazy. It's necessary, because people need to learn from each other, and the only lasting change comes about because it slowly earns widespread assent. Such change can require decades. (263)

In summary, Kloppenberg helps us see that one of the most important things for understanding Obama is his ideas and ideals. However, he also shows us just how realistic Obama is about how difficult it is to put them into practice to advance the common good. He opens his interpretation with these twin insights (see quote, right).

He also concludes with them when he points

out that for Obama **you have to have toughness and patience to bring about lasting democratic change.** (261)

I'm with Kloppenberg in the hope that Obama gets his much deserved second-term-chance to work for just such lasting transformational change and the health of our nation.

Quote

“Democracy in a pluralist culture means coaxing a common good to emerge from the clash of competing individual interests. Bringing ideals to life requires power. Balancing principles and effectiveness in the public sphere is hard work, an unending process of trial and error. No formulas ensure success.” (xxxvi)

I recommend Amy Frykholm's excellent brief review of this book in *Christian Century* magazine, 10/4/11. [Click here for the link.](#)

I also recommend the video of Kloppenberg's 20-minute interview with Charlie Rose about this book. [Click here for the link.](#)