

THE OBAMA EFFECT: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL OBSERVATION OF OBAMA'S MARKETING RHETORIC AND DISCOURSE**

Abstract. *Theoretical psychoanalysis, as developed from Jacques Lacan to Slavoj Žižek, provides us with adequate conceptual tools to rethink Obama's political rhetoric as a postmodern marketing discourse, which aims not at fulfilling consumers' needs and/or satisfying their demands but rather aims at a discursive entrapment of their desire and/or its phantasmatic scenario. The article analyses the 2008 and 2012 Obama presidential campaign, and his renown Cairo speech by demonstrating the three catchphrases Yes We Can!, Hope, and Forward! as embodiment of the three unconscious scenarios of the American dream. The three sound bites are designated as master-signifiers of Obama's empty speech, the Lacanian concept that enabled understanding the ups and downs of the zeal and spell of the charismatic Obama Effect.*

Keywords: *Barack H. Obama, political marketing, psychoanalytic theory, rhetoric, American presidential elections, theory of discourse, Obamania*

Introduction

Obama's rhetoric is very well known today for its charismatic effects. What we propose here is a retrospective psychoanalysis that allows us to think it as if a marketing strategy. A very postmodern marketing strategy, which presents its product not as a fulfillment of a wish and/or satisfying a demand, but rather as an entrapment of desire and/or its distinctive phantasmatic scenario.

Obama's rhetorical skills had their first successful mass-hypnotic effect during the US presidency campaign in 2008. They reached Europe in the same period and were prominently exposed in his Cairo speech in 2009.

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The importance of this speech as a milestone in Obama's rhetorical career is well-marked, for it allowed him even to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in the same year. Although the purpose of this article is not to discuss geopolitics, it is only in this very broad context that it is possible to fully understand what was called "Obamania" in popular media discourse and what we propose to call, in more analytical terms, the "Obama Effect". By this concept we mean the fascination of the public which results in the support given to a politician who acts as any other politician, but speaks with forceful rhetoric that borders on the realm of religious discourses combined with evidently secular marketing techniques. The latter is by no means a novelty in the modern political arena, and many of the renowned conclusions of famous Freud's group psychology (*cf.* Freud, 1955) can still be applicable. However, one must understand them in the postmodern condition of consumerism, identity formations, and an imagery of uninhibited choices, to name but few.

To fully understand this phenomenon of fascination we must first stress that it is this very rhetoric and its marketing effect that has gained Obama political support regardless the – and in some cases even despite of – concrete policies that were enacted by his administration. In the statement of the Nobel Prize committee we can find some evidence to help us, if not to fully support this statement, at least to introduce the way we are going to read, interpret and think the relevance of Obama's rhetoric:¹ "We are giving this year's prize to Mr. Obama, because he is one of the few whose diplomacy is based on the idea of common values of the majority of the people on Earth." Now, for us it is of utmost importance that the dictum says "whose diplomacy is based", for diplomacy is by definition something that belongs to the realm of discourse, and thus its alliance with rhetoric is undeniable. As good old Cicero would have put it: Even without particular rhetorical techniques, a spokesman is using rhetoric, bad one, but still rhetoric. The point being that rhetoric is an inseparable part of any discourse, and whenever someone speaks publicly, he is subjected to its logic, voluntarily or involuntarily.

Another purpose of our analysis is to demonstrate how Obama's rhetoric can be looked upon as a marketing strategy through what Jacques Lacan conceptualized as "empty speech" (as opposed to "full speech") (*cf.* Lacan, 2006). In the case of empty speech, the denotative value (explicit content) is completely suspended, and perhaps the most notable characteristic of such empty speech (and the one that adds a distinctive Kafkaesque quality to it) is that its empty rhetoric aims not at hiding the politics behind the narrative, but in camouflaging the fact that there are no politics beyond or beneath the

¹ This and all following quotes can be found at: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/press.html.

rhetoric/ritualistic form at all. In the discourse of empty speech, the holder of the rhetoric office comes to adopt the position of the pure instrument of the big Other's Will, acting out of some historical necessity or another, thus desubjectivizing or emptying himself of any particularity, producing an illusory effect of universality.² The concept of empty speech allows us to follow the spin of the Obama Effect; it declines by each attempt to fill the empty gesture with some particular content. In this conceptual setting Obama's marketing strategy is exposed as a purely ideological phenomenon that claims universality, and, moreover, it is precisely in this sense that it borders to religion, too.

To be sure, there is another universality bordering to religion, an unconscious phantasy of a postmodern individual fulfillment, the aim of one's desire – love.³ It is not an exaggeration to view the relationship of Obama and his voters as that of love in a strict Lacanian sense of the word: love is giving something you don't have to someone that doesn't exist. We will demonstrate how Obama and the American people bonded together in love through supporting each other's fantasy, masking each other's lack.

The assumption that the main effect of Obama's rhetoric on the public is primarily a mystical one can be shown, again, with the findings of the Nobel Prize committee: "Only very rarely has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future." Giving the Nobel Peace Prize to a political leader for "giving hope" clearly shows how, when dealing with Obama, we are not dealing merely with a secular political figure, but no more and no less than with a "spiritual guru", who would not only "keep the change" (as a witty post-election graffiti in New York ironized Obama's slogan "Change"), but who would also pay the price for this prize, take upon himself all the burdens of History.

While the realm of erratic unconsciousness was largely ignored by a dominant rational choice paradigm of explaining how people go about their daily business, it is, we presume, essential not only to complement the letter paradigm with the irrational components; it is rather necessary to view the unconscious, phantasmatic universe of a human being as an underlying premise of a new rationale in (political) consumerism. When making

² *Universality is a philosophical concept opposed to relativism, both heavily anchored in the Western tradition of thought; designing, in the broadest sense of the word, omnipresent and transhistorical truths, it was seldom employed by politics and ideologies in order to present a particular idea as universal, starting from Christianity and later on retaken by the French Revolution onward (cf. Arendt, 1990).*

³ *Although the concept of phantasm has a long history in philosophy dating back to Plato and Aristotle and in present times used by many prominent past or contemporary philosophers from Derrida to Deleuze, we understand it here in the specific Lacanian sense of the word: the phantasm is a subject's imaginary scenario, constructed with symbolic means of signifiers, centered around the impossibility of the traumatic real (see, for example: Lacan, 1991: 119–120; see also Žižek's book entirely dedicated to the concept: cf. Žižek, 2009b).*

choices, the disenchanting meta-narratives are debunked as always already particular, lacking the whole insight, prejudicial, capital-driven, etc., and are nowadays being supplemented by seemingly un-ideological “feel for the thing”. Indeed, (political) marketing scholars have in the last decade turned to “a perspective that emphasizes intangible resources, the co-creation of value and sustainable relationships” (Butler and Harris, 2009: 194).

To fully understand how it is possible that Obama was so successful in convincing the Americans, Europeans and Arabs as well, we must first turn to his election discourse and marketing machinery that was initially employed. In the second part we are going to analyze the distinctively religious aspects of Obama’s speech in Cairo, where he upgraded his implicitly religious discourse of “Hope” with some explicitly religious additions borrowed from the three fundamental books of monotheism. Finally, in the third part, we will try to evaluate some key elements of our analyses and introduce an analysis of Obama’s re-election campaign labeled as “Forward!”

The Elections of 2008: ‘Yes We Kant’ or The Ethics of Capitalism and the Spirit of Americanism

What more is there to be said in retrospective about the first presidential elections of 2008 in which Obama took charge? Where can we find reasons for such an incontestable nomination of Obama for a Democratic Party nominee for the presidential race? Can it really all be ascribed to the failure of the former president Bush’s politics, or to the collapse of the real estate sector, or to the still ongoing global economic crisis, or perhaps to the devastating climate changes, cunning use of new technologies, etc.? Or has it perhaps more to do with the effect of the promise of a presidency and administration radically different from any other in the whole modern history of the US? A presidency backed-up with the renewal of anti-discrimination civil movements which gave rise to one ‘New America’? How did one presidential nominee manage to enforce such a selective (and seductive) view of the glorious aspects of American history that he was perceived as one and only heir to the original founding fathers of Americanism, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy and Rosa Parks?

When interpreting Obama’s success, political analysts have embarked from “the big picture” of the above mentioned contents of the *Zeitgeist*. It is our opinion, however, that it would be more fruitful to look at it from the opposite end – through the phantasmatic gaze of a quotidian “common American”. If one wanted to explain, at least to a certain degree, the mass-hypnotic effect Obama has had during the first election campaign, his rhetorical and marketing techniques should be regarded as an entrapment of some basic American phantasms. This is, so it seems, the best way

to understand the uncritical continuity of support for him, not only by his fellow Democrats, but also by a part of Republicans, most Europeans, and, as already emphasized, a wide spectrum of people from the Arabic world. This very same uncritical continuity spilled over (was Forwarded! *sic!*) even in the 2012 USA presidential elections.

When the German philosopher Immanuel Kant formulated his idea of a free individual, he positioned it between the parameters of the moral law within us and the starry sky above us (*cf.* Kant, 1993). The only possible free act is the one which is made for duty's sake alone: "You must, *so ... you can!*" You can perform an act because you must, because you cannot not to. Our moral duty is therefore not fulfilled in order to pursue wealth or happiness (which might just as well derive from such an action); the only gain is the evasion of the painful guilt which would arise if we did not follow the imperative. This gain is, of course, only a secondary effect, a moral bonus, a collateral damage, in short: an excuse – not the motive, which must be "pure", "emptied" of any particular content, insists Kant all throughout his *Critique of practical reason*. Any particular motives, reasons and most of all calculable effects compromise the law of duty, which is turned from "a goal in itself" to a mere "instrument for fulfilling a goal". Only such an individual, fully subjected to the law of duty and presumably free of any philosophical or pragmatic dilemmas regarding "What should I do" and/or "Can I do it" can truly be called a free individual.

This is what Kant is telling us, but it appears as if the so-called "American way of life" is imbued with a different kind of "call of duty". The consumption ethics of post-industrial America, according to Žižek's interpretation, imposes a peculiar version of Kant's maxim: "You must ... *because you can!*" (Žižek, 1999: 99). Following this twist, which is not a mere word-game (as many tend to misunderstand Žižek's twisted thinking), we can see a different kind of freedom arising from the moral law. This constellation puts the moral law above us, and the starry sky within us. In the present day postmodern conditions of mass-society we are facing a multiple imaginary of infinite possibilities (*cf.* Salecl, 2010); everything is possible, an individual can make of one's life whatever one wants, and none of the preexisting state of affairs of History, neither biology nor religion, can have a decisive influence on it. Whatever was traditionally a given attribute and an anchor of personal identities (the color of the skin, sex/gender, nationality, political or religious beliefs, etc.) has slowly started to be regarded first as an obstacle, and then as a challenge, which must be taken head on when immersed in the necessary process of inventing and reinventing an identity. This is what the contemporary managerial ideology – propagated and diffused mainly through the work of Peter F. Drucker, the recently deceased guru of this ideology in our era – calls "self-fulfillment" or "personal development" (*cf.* Drucker,

1999). At the heart of consumption ethics, produced through the managerial discourse of a “personal development”, lies an image of an individual, who is “one s own”, a “self-made man” immune to old values and authorities toward which one tends to have, or is required to have, a particularly cynical distance or even a paranoid attitude. His allegiance is to himself and to himself only, because he is convinced that any other form of emotional attachment would lead to betrayal, frustration, abandonment and pain. The only warranty of personal identity becomes a feeling of authenticity, a feeling that we came to embody a unique and priceless originals and that at the same time we managed to retain a certain skeptical distance towards everything. If given a voice, this kind of an individual would probably say: “Don’t be fooled by the old criteria, big stories are over, and hegemonic ideologies which defined and confined our free choices are all dead and done with! In us there dwells a starry sky which we are compelled to (re)discover and enjoy!” The only thing above us is the moral law of civilized tolerance, which repressively commands that we self-fulfill freely only inasmuch as we do not interfere with the self-fulfillment of a fellow human being. Now, finally, “We Can!” This “We Can!” thus becomes a tyranny, a must, our obligation, our duty’s imperative, so conveniently voiced out by Obama.

To exemplify our point let us now envision the 2008 American presidential election as if McCain’s adversary had been Hillary Clinton, who lost the Democratic Party nomination to Obama. Such a duel would have been perceived as a choice between two mainstream establishments, between two hegemonic ideologies, where it would not have mattered who had been elected. In this case the freedom of choice would have seemed as non-existent and the possibility of an authentic act as suspended. With opposition between McCain and Obama established, the imagery of the elections turned into an apparent contest between an ideological “choice-of-no-choice” and an authentic act of freedom. The first trick of these elections was therefore creating the illusion that “now we REALLY have a choice”, there “exists a REAL difference between the two candidates”. This in turn produced the illusion of free-choice, an illusion unfolding itself in the narration of a “historical moment in US history”. Moreover, it opened space to a phantasmatic scenario which implied that after a series of presidential elections when we, the Americans, were left with no real choices, now finally we got it back. Contemporary critique of post-ideological interpellation praxis clearly shows how a postmodern free individual is interpellated in “the call of ideology”: a free individual can be interpellated into the subject of ideology only if it assumes the masque of an anti-hegemonic, i.e. anti-ideological praxis (*cf.* Ahmed, 2006). To put it simply: to demonstrate that we are truly free of any ideology, we have to act so that our actions would appear to ourselves as non-ideological. The first trick of this election was therefore the

creation of an illusory alternative between ideology and freedom, oppression and infinite possibilities – the phantasmatic alternatives on which the USA was supposedly built upon and which, through the chain of right choices, kept it going in its “authentic Americanism”.

The second trick of the presidential elections was in representing the battle between freedom and ideology as a nostalgic, pre-modern notion, an endeavor always already lost for a postmodern man, as a fight not worth fighting (any more). The implicit message derived from history, and applicable to any 21st century American’s personal experience, was: “It is impossible to overcome the discriminatory praxis of racial prejudice, the multi-corporations and their omnipotent capital, the tenacious and vicious web of politics!”. During his battle for the democratic nomination and further on during the presidential campaign, Obama, as a rule, was departing from this postmodern nihilism, beginning his speeches with phrases such as: “They told us that we’d never ...” or “They are saying that it is impossible ...”, followed by the meaningful “But...” implying: “but this is America. In America, everything is possible”. And, we have to repeat the new formulation of a postmodern true American “call of duty”: “*You can, so you must!*” Furthermore, the surplus meaning and the desiring component of imagery of infinite possibilities could only be accomplished through denying the anticipated impossibility, replacing it by bravery to fight it against all odds. As we venture to analyze carefully the democrat’s slogan, we find that its maxim was not simply “We Can”, but “Yes We Can”, which is a phrase meaningful only as a reply to a preceding “You Can’t”. An un-ideological “We Can” became an interpellation maxim precisely through the introduction of this little word, “Yes”, which turns the whole phrase into a fully-developed product of a marketing discourse, opening up a space for autonomous individual choice, entrapping the desire.

The entire motivational potential therefore lies in the assumption of granted powerlessness, conspiracy even, that somewhere there exist some “dark forces”, which will (once again – echoing the Bush-Gore 2000 presidential election campaign) prevail by the power of the Capital in taking from us precisely that Treasure which constitutes the very essence of us as, the Americans. Being a sound bite and a metaphor at once (*cf.* Landtsheer et al., 2008), “Yes We Can” becomes a “master-signifier”⁴ which sutures the masses into a community of their own, completely in accordance with the old

⁴ *The master-signifier is one of Lacan’s key concepts developed and employed in his later Seminars in order to distinguish the linguistic logic of ordinary signifiers from their arbitrary and power-related counterpart, that not only cannot be reduced to being their peer, but is the condition *in qua non* signifiers function in any given language order as meaningful; in short, the master-signifiers, although it has no sense at all, gives sense to all (see, for example, the development of this concept in Lacan’s most political Seminar XVII.: Lacan, 1991).*

mythological view which sees America as “the land of the free and the home of the brave”, who live in a country of infinite possibilities and who refuse to be deprived (again) of their freedom. Here things got really personal to the Americans which is why one should not be bewildered by the fact that “the Obama ‘08 campaign created a nationwide virtual organization that motivated 3.1 million individual contributors and mobilized a grassroots movement of more than 5 million volunteers” (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 189). A common American, an average Joe or Jane, may well be thinking like this: “To be worthy of living in my forefathers’ country, I must prove that everything is possible here.” But, we have to argue, the kind of freedom which leaves an individual only one choice, the choice to do what *one must because one can*, is, once more, no freedom at all. This choice was thus a forced one yet again.

Kant would certainly turn in his grave if confronted with such a perversion of the noble moral law within, but to Freud’s nephew Edward Bernays, the famous inventor of public relations and marketing, the two recent American presidential elections would certainly represent every propagandist’s starry sky. Bernays coined the term “public relations” as a euphemism for ideological propaganda (*cf.* Bernays, 1928). It speaks volumes that Josef Goebbels himself spoke of Bernays’s works very admiringly and *vice versa*. And what lies at the heart of Bernays’ “marvelous discovery” (to use his own words)? In short, he noted that there is no sharp, clear-cut or telling distinction between the commonly contrasted European totalitarian societies of the epoch and the American democratic society⁵. The difference lies only in the absence of physical violence in a presumably democratic society, wherein the people must only have the impression that they can express themselves freely and democratically, regardless of the actual situation. In a nutshell: a façade of democracy is sufficient for a society, to *be* democratic – a façade of freedom is sufficient for a society to *be* free. In Bernays’ own words from the very first two paragraphs of his *Propaganda*:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. (Bernays, 1928: 9)

⁵ A persuasive argument can be made, however, that particular theoretical concepts of democracy are to different degrees compatible with various perspectives of political marketing management (Henneberg et al., 2009).

Which leads him to an obvious conclusion that “no serious sociologist any longer believes that the voice of the people expresses any divine or especially wise and lofty idea” but rather that the “voice of the people expresses the mind of the people, and that mind is made up for by the group leaders in whom it believes and by those persons who understand the manipulation of public opinion”; in short: “It is composed of inherited prejudices and symbols and clichés and verbal formulas supplied to them by the leaders.” (Bernays, 1928: 91). Almost one hundred years after this is even truer. In an ever faster spinning world of overconsumption, for consumers, at least, there is “little difference in the process of deciding whether to vote, to give blood, to give to charity, or to recycle one’s household waste. Nevertheless, whatever the process, it seems clear that economic rationality can rarely provide more than a passing explanation.” (Dean and Croft, 2009: 143) Or, to put it once again in Althusserian terms: in democratic societies it is precisely the absence of direct repression that produces ideology in its purest forms (cf. Žižek, 2009; 2009a).

And what, then, was the third trick of the 2008 American presidential elections? They managed to present themselves as straightforward elections without tricks, merely turning the unconscious imagery of an American into a conscious Thing in itself, represented by the master-signifier of Obama’s utterance. The two folded process of falling in love was completed; Obama became the Lacanian *Le sujet supposé savoir* (SSS), “the subject supposed to know” (Homer, 2005: 123–124), a privileged possessor of some charismatic power, which in turn enabled the people to become the Americans of their own dreams. Only the people adorned by the phantasmatic veil of their own myths could (then) provide Him legitimacy.

With Obama winning his first presidential elections, the illusion of the identity of the USA (as a political entity) with America (as the home of the American dream) was, after some temporary lapses, once more confirmed.

The Cairo Speech: “No, You Kant” or The Reinvention of American Universalism

On 4th of June 2009 Obama gave his famous speech at the University of Cairo in Egypt, a not so empty “empty speech” anymore, to be sure, but which nevertheless – or precisely because of that – delivered him the Nobel Peace Prize in the same year. If we put again geopolitics into brackets: Obama’s speech in Cairo can be best described in terms of marketing as “Obama’s award winning speech” – and according to our thesis one can speculate that it is precisely because a positive content was installed in this empty speech that this time it needed a formal confirmation from the internationally recognized Big Other (Nobel Prize Committee).

The message of this speech echoed through the mass-media mainly because of its far-reaching promise of Hope, for he had “come to find a new beginning with the Muslim world” and to “break the vicious cycle of dif-fidence and discordance”.⁶ Obama’s rhetorical religious style was evident and singled out very early not only by political analysts but also by media and the people themselves, who perceived Obama as the new Martin Luther King. We will try to go a step further and identify Obama’s standpoint as an ultimate meta-religious position, which goes, or tries to go, beyond any particular religious position. A position from where Obama, in his Cairo speech, quotes and interprets not only the Christian Bible (as was common for many American presidents), but also the Hebraic Torah and even the Muslim Quran: “Be conscious of God and speak always the truth. That is what I will try to do, to speak the truth as best I can, humbled by the task before us, and firm in my belief that the interests we share as human beings are far more powerful than the forces that drive us apart.” Again, the crucial point is this little word, “can”, which was the driving force of his propaganda for the elections, and from this point of view his speech in Cairo represents a continuation of the same logic at work: in the phrase “to speak the truth as best I can” the emphasis should be put on the “can”, i.e. on his rhetoric and its effect on the public.

Obama’s preacher-like-position is inscribed in his very manner of talking about the actual conflict, and in this regard one could say that he speaks not only as a preacher, but also as a true messiah. In fact, he literally transcends the factual reality and transports political questions into the religious realm, where facts become truths. This can be palpably grasped in his understanding of political questions as “historical forces” – which are equated with cultural and religious differences between Christians, Muslims and Jews – “which go beyond any current debate”: “We meet at a time of tension between the United States and Muslims around the world, tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate.” Instead of a policy debate Obama therefore suggest a debate that “goes beyond”: if religious matters themselves are commonly referred to as something that goes beyond, Obama tries to go even more beyond in stating a truth that “transcends nations and people”: “There is also one rule that lies at the heart of every religion, that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. This truth transcends nations and peoples – a belief that isn’t new; that isn’t black or white or brown; that isn’t Christian, or Muslim or Jew. It’s a belief that pulsed in the cradle of civilization, and that still beats in the heart of billions. It’s faith in other people, and it’s what brought me here today.”

⁶ The full transcription of Obama’s speech quoted here and onwards can be found on the following Al Jazeera internet site: <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/06/200906410251287187.html>.

The truth of which Obama speaks, “a truth that lies in the hearth of every religion”, is far from being as universal as it seems at first glance, because the phrase “do unto others as we would have them do unto us” can be found in this form only in the New Testament, more precisely in Luke’s writings: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Lk, 6: 31) This very typical new-age way of looking at all religions as mixed into one is very problematic from many perspectives, but Obama’s problem is even deeper, because he mixes up all the religious maxims, yet in the end it is still the Christian one that sneaks from behind and prevails.

Luke’s statement in the New Testament, also known as “the Golden Rule”, is (in its secular version) articulated as “the principle of reciprocity” by various philosophies which claim its “universal validity”, seemingly regardless of the religious sphere from which it is derived. But even if this were the case it would still be impossible to assume with Obama that this principle of reciprocity lies “in the heart of every religion”, because the main difference lies precisely in *the form* in which this principle is articulated. While most, if not all, religious moral articulations keep the negative form, the “principle of reciprocity”, as stated by Jesus through the voice of Luke and repeated through centuries even by those who claim to be purely secular philosophers, is articulated in a positive form: if the main form of articulation of moral principles consists of the negative “do not do...”, the so-called “principle of reciprocity” states “do to others...” as you would like them to “do to you”. The difference between *do not* and *do* can best be understood as the difference between a principle based on prohibition, and a principle based on a command: the first is restricting, while the other is commanding a determined course of action. This opens the moral realm to what Kant determined as “pathological motives”, which undermine the very basis of morality (*cf.* Kant, 1993): for Kant, the moral imperative must be articulated formally, valid universally, and respected categorically, while the basis for any course of action must not be the act itself, but the “good will” of the acting person, and any motives apart from the categorical respect of the moral imperative itself are regarded as pathological (the wish for a reward, fear of punishment, be it by a court of “this world or another”, etc.). That is why he articulated his moral imperative as abstractly as possible, as “formal and universal”, as it can possibly be articulated “by reason”, but still in quite a dangerous resemblance to the Christian “Golden Rule”: “So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as the principle giving universal law.” (Kant, 1993: 30) Considered from a Kantian standpoint, Obama’s statement “I am proud to carry with me the good will of the American people”, can be regarded not only as a sign of his “good will”, but also as a guarantee that his actions, based on the “truth that lies in the heart of every religion”, will be and are “moral” – but, as with Kant, this is far from being the case.

G. B. Shaw once said that the main problem of the “golden rule” lies in the fact that it is perhaps not such a good idea to expect from others that they will act as they expect to be treated by you: “Do not do unto others as you would expect they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same.” In Shaw’s statement resides the very point of Hegel’s critique of Kant as stated in his *Philosophy of Right*: Kant’s moral philosophy is “an empty formalism” and his moral imperative is “an empty rhetoric of *duty for duty’s sake*”, from which “no imminent theory of duty can arise”, and according to Kant’s formalistic principles no “consideration can be made about a concrete course of action”, but, quite the contrary, as Hegel says, “it is possible to justify any wrong or immoral mode of action by this means.” (Hegel, 2008: 162) Jacques Lacan knew how to exploit Hegel’s critique very well in combining *Kant avec Sade*: not only does Sade’s perverse maxim, (which can be formulated as: “Take pleasure in the body of another as you would like the other to take pleasure from yours”), fulfill Kant’s criteria of morality in every aspect (formality, universality and categorical obedience), but also the contrary is true, Kant’s own categorical imperative fulfills Sade’s criteria of perversity (Lacan, 1999: 246–247). In short, Kant’s maxim, as the New Testament’s ‘Golden rule’, is perverse precisely because it is articulated as positive, as a command, which requires obedience, regardless of the content, and it seems Obama’s case is similarly, if not even more perverse, if we include into consideration the position from which Obama speaks. On one hand Obama wants to assert “universally valid truth”, on the other hand he wants to implement it on the concrete situation of the American-Arab conflict. Even for Kant the main problem of the Golden rule lies in the context: the simple example he poses is the one in which we find a criminal in a court of law stating to the judge that he must not send him to jail as he would not want to be sent to jail himself. In the same way, if we were to take Obama seriously, we would be inclined to ask him: “Do you really want the Arabs to treat the Americans the same way? Do you really want the Iraqi army to invade the United States?” Of course not, he only wants to assert his good will and in a very Kantian way demand from all the public to judge him not by his actions, but by his intentions.

The end of his speech in Cairo itself shows how this discrepancy between intentions and action is inscribed in Obama’s rhetoric precisely because of what he himself understands as “we”: “We have the power to make the world we seek, but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning, keeping in mind what has been written.” In what follows he cites all three holy books, placing every side in its place, and if we read carefully, he does not forget to include his own position of speaking, from which he says “we”. From “The Holy Quran” he cites the part which makes an appeal to what is in post-modern rhetoric considered as “multi-cultural” dialogue: “O, mankind! We

have created you male and female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.” Quite obviously he is not only reducing the Arabs to Muslims, but also patronizing them, as if he was saying that they should be more “open to different cultures”, which from his position means the Israelites in particular and Western culture in general. From the Hebrew Talmud he cites the part where the “promotion of peace” is at hand: “The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace,” as if saying that the main purpose of the state of Israel is “to promote peace”, or, even more perversely, that they should not worry and partake in a “peaceful course of action”, because now he, as a personification of “the American people” whose “good will” he is carrying along, is now ready to take over. This ‘takeover’ can be quite clearly read in his final citation from “The Holy Bible”: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” It is rather symptomatic, almost on the border of being a true Obama’s bushism, that “peacemakers” does not mean simply “those who preserve peace” – they are not “peacekeepers”, but “those who *make* peace”.

Although the secret now no longer lies in the “can” of “Yes We Can”, but in the “we”, so that the phrase should read: “Yes *We* Can”. This is coupled with another statement, “No, You *Can’t*”, with the “can’t” pronounced with a British accent, so as to sound more like “Kant”. It is irrelevant what was Obama’s intention in saying what he said – the important is what he actually did say and the effect of the signifier invoked: his Cairo-speech stated that the Other should hold on to the negative form (“No, You can *not*”), while “We” will partake in a course of action founded on the positive form (“Yes, We *can*”).

In light of our previous analysis (and in the shadow of the current geopolitical situation), and regarding the way in which the involved parties were put in their respective places, one can conclude that Obama’s speech in Cairo, far from being a new beginning, is precisely a continuation of his propaganda campaign from his fist presidential campaign in the US and already a marketing strategy for the next elections, which, not without the help of the Big Other (Nobel Prize Committee), he actually won.

The Reelections of 2012: “Forward!” or “*Encore?*”

In the 2012 presidential elections the American people were served their own myth and the imagery of free choice once more. However, to paraphrase Shakespeare, it was now a dish served cold; a remainder that the four years old zeal needs another kick off. And the novelty this time came in the disguise of a very telling master-signifier: “Forward!”

During the four years of the first presidency every particular content which have been invested into signification by Obama led to

disenchantment, disappointment and disavowal – the same happens with the objects of our love: our desire can never be fulfilled by a positive, materially existing object (cf. Žižek, 1999a). All positive objects merely occupy a pre-given fantasy place at one time or another, and are sooner or later dismissed as an unfulfilable “That’s not It”. Everything Obama did, either positive (winning a Nobel peace prize) or negative (not keeping one promise or another) was obliterating the phantasy scenario within which our desire dwells and was weakening the love relationship between the president and his people. Lacan insists that the ultimate aim of a desire is not to reach its goal, but to fail and remain circling – unfulfilled and uncompromised (cf. Lacan, 1992).

It is meaningful that the most exhaustive Lacan’s seminar on the topic of desire is entitled *Encore*, and even in English translation the title is left in original French transcript, implying multilayered content and/or meaning, thus, for that matter, masking the lack thereof. However, if we ventured translating it into one single English word the best choice would most definitely be *Forward*. Forward does not refer to any content: if anything it outlines the empty form in its infinite travel – it is a signifier of an impetus of ethics of desire, commitment to go to the end, not to give up on desire no matter what (cf. Lacan, 1992). Forward as a signifier designates precisely the repression of content-full language; its flip side being the emptiness, the void, the lack upon which our desire is founded.

Let us briefly elaborate. As understood by interpretative psychoanalysis, “the subject is never adequately represented in a signifier” (ibid.: 46), or language. What cannot be articulated in language and pertains to the subject desire, is what Lacan called the object-cause-of-desire (*objet petit a*), which is not something substantial we can find and thus satisfy our desire, but is rather the function of masking the lack in the subject, the very lack that makes one a desiring subject (who cannot be satisfied by petty realization of need and/or demand). Object-cause-of-desire is the formless remainder which resists subjectivization: *objet a* is “not merely the objectal correlative to the subject, it is the subject itself in its impossible objectal existence” (Žižek, 2007: 102). Strictly speaking then, *objet a* is an all-pervasive feeling of lack upon which desire is founded, and which lays beyond any positive contentment of need and gratification of demand.

To bring the argument back home: the re-election appeal “Forward!” thus did not imply a content-based re-evaluation of Obama’s successes or failures, but, to the contrary, an imperative to go beyond, skip every and each (miss)placed act of Obama’s administration as irrelevant at best or at least not yet ready for judgment which would inevitably conclude in a laconic “that’s not it”. Any content-full, meaningful or objectal promise would only be a supererogatory offer to meet the demand and/or gratify

the need, which would be an obstacle in what one desires most: desiring the desire, casing the *objet a*. As Žižek puts it: "Desire's *raison d'être* is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire." (Žižek, 2009b: 39). In a rhetorical discourse of any sort, political, poetical or commercial, this can best be accomplished by failing to address the positive contents – the need and the demand – of the desire as pure negativity. In short, instead of a need-or-demand fulfilling object, the rhetorical discourse in such instances addresses the hysterically capricious "desire to desire".

In good old Freudian terms the master-signifier Forward can be read as a hysterical invitation to repeat what we cannot remember, an imperative to forget the content in order to replicate the enjoyment. Putting it bluntly: Forward is not a promise of anything new or old. If anything, it is a promise and a reminder that "We, the People", failed by electing Obama four years before and that, as Samuel Beckett would famously propose, if we try again, we might fail even better.

Conclusion

What we tried to establish as the Obama Effect is now in decline since at least 2010, a decline that continues even after his re-election in 2012. Based on our analysis we will now try to evaluate this shift from extreme fascination to radical disappointment of the general public.

In the analysis of Obama's presidential campaign rhetoric we have seen how the promise of change, delivered through the religious message of hope, provided the ground for an ideological interpellation in its purest form that started what we conceptualized as the Obama Effect. Now we can add that the promised change was of course only symbolic, but nonetheless effective, since it drew its power not from real politics, but from the sphere of religion, implicitly present in the message of hope. This was further proven through the analysis of Obama's speech in Cairo, where the religious discourse was explicitly invoked in order to endow the political discourse with the aura of universality. But as it is always the case when transcendental ideologies collide with worldly, human-made reality: actual politics did not deliver any of the promised changes, even worse, the universal renewal of values turned out to be just another attempt at universalization of specifically American or at the very least Western values – and so fascination started to decline and transform into frustration.

Thus we can see that the fascination with the messianic figure of Obama was not only an effect of his rhetoric, but also entirely projected upon it and therefore grounded in it. From this perspective it is perhaps tempting to speculate that the main reason for the painful (at least for some) process of de-fascination was actually not the collision with the real world and

the discrepancy between election discourse and politics, but rather a discrepancy inherent in Obama's rhetoric itself. The most notable shift that occurred from the period of the presidential campaign in the US (and Europe, let us not forget), the political tour in the Middle East and the period from 2010–2011 up until his re-election in 2012 was, on a formal level, a shift from religious empty-speech rhetoric to more conventional and realistic political discourse. The de-fascination can be therefore seen also as a product of the change in rhetoric, regardless of the discrepancy between words and deeds.

The reasons for the decline of the Obama Effect can therefore be found in the same elements that produced the effectiveness of Obama's rhetoric in the first place. Through his powerful rhetoric that promised change and universal values, Obama was perceived as different, thus incarnating a difference that would bring change and moral renewal in politics, not only in the United States, but also in Europe and even in the Arabo-Islamic World. In fact, all the supposed differences turned out to be just the same kind of difference, a change of change itself into something identical, a promise of universal values that turned out to be as particular as any other value-system that tries to claim universality. But this discrepancy between rhetorical discourse and political action would not have been as decisive in the turn from blind fascination to plain disappointment, if it was not reflected by a similar shift that occurred from religious speech to a more realistic and therefore conventional, content-ridden political discourse. In other words: the rhetoric of truth, interwoven in the texture of the magic carpet on which Obama spectacularly ascended to power, started to dissolve in collision with the texture of reality and his own shift from religious to more realistic and less truth-full rhetoric, thus becoming the very reason for his equally spectacular downfall.

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