

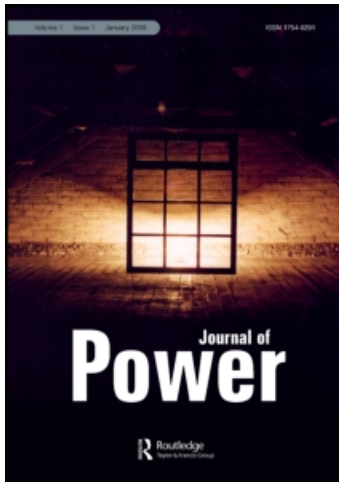
This article was downloaded by: [informa internal users]

On: 22 June 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 755239602]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Power

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t778749998>

The democratic struggle for power: the 2008 Presidential campaign in the USA

Jeffrey C. Alexander ^a

^a Yale University,

Online Publication Date: 01 April 2009

To cite this Article Alexander, Jeffrey C.(2009)'The democratic struggle for power: the 2008 Presidential campaign in the USA',Journal of Power,2:1,65 — 88

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17540290902760881

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17540290902760881>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The democratic struggle for power: the 2008 Presidential campaign in the USA

Jeffrey C. Alexander*

Yale University

This essay makes both empirical and theoretical claims. Empirically, it develops one of the first sociological approaches to the recently completed 2008 Presidential campaign in the USA. Theoretically, it offers a cultural-sociological challenge to the kinds of instrumentalist, materialist, and institutionalist approaches that have been central to power studies. In democratic societies, the struggle for ultimate power is a symbolic conflict. The goal is to become a certain kind of collective representation, one that embodies the ideals of the civil sphere. The struggle to represent the civil sphere is performative, of sculpting an image and projecting it to fragmented audiences. Such efforts to fuse actor and audience are mediated by relatively independent interpretive processes, launched not only by political and social antagonists but by the very mass media upon which the successful projection of messages depend. For this reason, successful struggles for civil power are highly contingent. One must not only become a hero but a hero inside of civil society, working the binaries that confer and undermine legitimacy, but one must also work the boundaries, framing the relations that connect the civil sphere with such noncivil spheres as economy, race, gender, and religion, boundaries that are fluid and subject to construction.

Keywords: power; performance; culture; civil sphere; Obama

We must begin with a sociological understanding of democracy, but not with the ones that have dominated the social science disciplines up until this time. We must approach the democratic struggle for power by going inside the civil sphere, the world that has been a black box for normative and empirical theory alike.¹

The civil sphere as the arena for power struggles

The civil sphere provides the ‘space for democracy,’ and democracy depends on the relative autonomy of the civil sphere. The civil sphere is not merely a legal arena, defined as those subject to the state. Neither does it consist primarily of private non-state associations, voluntary groups in the American or capitalist sense. The civil sphere must be conceived, in the first instance, as a structure of feeling. It is defined by the experience of solidarity, by the feeling of identity, or at least empathy, for every person living inside a legally defined territory. What makes solidarity democratic and civil, rather than authoritarian and primordial, is its breadth, on the one hand, and its

*Email: jeffrey.alexander@yale.edu

autonomy from other spheres, on the other. Civil solidarity is widely extant, a big tent. It is universal rather than particular, not a *volks-gemeinschaft* but something more abstract and broad, a societal community that goes beyond any particular religion, class, ethnicity, race, region, gender, and even sexuality to embrace as an ideal humanity as such. It is a solidarity that paradoxically rests upon the autonomy of its members, requiring each member to realize the individuality of every other.

What makes this civil solidarity powerful, and not merely a utopian ideal, is its independence in principle from other spheres. Though it depends on schools, families, religion, economy, and state, it is not the same as these spheres. It is an independent realm that is conceived as much broader and more voluntary than any of these. It is neither ruled by prescriptive dogmatic beliefs nor directed by hierarchies and powers. It is empowered from the bottom up, by individuals to whom are attributed self-control and rationality; openness, altruism, and generosity; honesty and independence, and the capacity to criticize without being aggressive. That democracies are peopled by such idealized persons is inscribed deeply in the public opinion that circulates through the civil sphere like gusts of wind. These beliefs compose a 'discourse of liberty' that constitutes one side, the positive side, of the discourse of civil society, the supra-individual, taken for granted, binary political language to which every social action inside civil societies must refer.

There is another, much more negative side of this discourse, a 'discourse of repression' that defines the antidemocratic qualities that can prevent persons from being allowed inside the civil sphere, or at least from being fully so. If people are viewed as out of control, impulsive, dependent and subservient, dishonest and secretive, prone to conspiracy rather than being open, selfish rather generous – then they do not deserve civil membership. Indeed, civil societies must defend themselves against such persons. Sometimes this discourse describes real dangers, but more often it does not. Projective rather than descriptive, performative rather than constative (Austin 1957), this binary discourse has historically justified the marginalization of all sorts of different groups, declaring perfectly decent fellow human beings to be dirty and polluted, justifying repression, and sometimes even murder, in the effort to maintain the purity of restrictive, particularistic versions of communities.

The civil sphere is much more, however, than a binary discourse. It is sustained also by a web of powerful institutions. Some are communicative, projecting evaluations and opinions in the form of mass media reports, whether factual or fictional, or as public opinion polls. Others are more regulative, speaking on behalf of the aspirations of the civil sphere but concerned also with enforcement, able to evoke coercion in the last instance. Democratic law is central in this regard. Equally important is the electoral system, which includes political parties, electoral struggle, franchise, and voting, a complex of institutional and symbolic processes that selects representatives of the civil sphere for the most powerful positions of the state.

It is this electoral struggle for state power that will concern us here.

Politics as performative action

What happens when a politician struggling for power addresses a crowd, speaks to interviewers, debates an opponent, makes a comment on TV? The politician emphatically states that the world is like this, declares in no uncertain terms that his opponent is doing that. Austin called these constative statements; they present themselves as descriptions, denoting something that is out there in the real world. The

contrast with such constative statements are performative ones. Rather than referring to the existence of some fact or quality as if it exists already, performative statements actually bring the situation into being by the very act of talking. Insofar as they are doing so, they are, to evoke his most famous phrase, 'doing things with words.' When making emphatic declarations about the state of the world, and ringing declarations about their opponents, politicians struggling for power would like us to believe their words are constative. Mostly, however, they are performative. They are less describing the world than wanting to bring that world into being in the imaginations of their listeners. They want to convince us that this is the way things are. If their performances are successful, we will be persuaded. This persuasion depends, Austin tells us, on whether political performances have 'felicity,' whether they are structured in an evocative manner that relates to our concerns, builds pictures in our mind, makes us identify with them and share their worldly visions. Felicitous performances create fusion between speaker and audience. When performances fuse, we endow them with verisimilitude. They seem real. We think the words of politicians are true and their selves are authentic.

To achieve performative power, politicians project their performances on elaborate stages, against evocative backdrops of flags, columns, and war-torn buildings; in front of bleachers and stadiums filled with cheering people; drive motorcades down streets lined – thanks to 'advance men' – with attentive and adoring fans. Yet, despite these and other efforts, political performances face a major problem (Alexander 2006b): large segments of their audiences are far away and feel disconnected. Modern societies are fragmented, segmented, and differentiated. Large swathes of the audiences for political performers do not have any particular affection for those who are struggling for power. Many of those who listen to their words and look at their images have no particular reason to believe what they hear or see, much less to attribute to these performances moral and emotional force. The goal of successful performance is fusion, but the audiences of modern societies are increasingly defused from the powers that be.²

The struggle to refuse speaker and audience, to connect with the members of civil society through felicitous performance – this is what the democratic struggle for power is all about. Those who want power must be elected, and they will not get votes unless their performances are successful, at least to some degree. This is why politicians and their advisers must put their heads together, run focus groups and conduct polls, and do daily interpretive battles with journalists as well as those on the other political side. They must project their ideological messages to audiences whom they do not know.

And to make this even more difficult, between politicians and their audiences there stands an entire profession and institutional framework. Journalists and media institutions interpret political performances before they reach even the most positively inclined voter-audience. To these audiences, news media present political performances denotatively, as fact; but they are already connotative: they are interpretations. And it is even worse than this! Not only do journalists filter political performances, but they inform audiences how they themselves have reacted to these interpretations.

Cultural sociology of political power

It should now be clear why struggles for political power need to be rethought in more meaning-centered terms. In political sociology, power is typically conceived as control over instruments of domination, as maximizing resources, as asymmetrical

exchange, as contingent struggle for strategic advantage or as reproducing elite power, whether that of state, class, gender, race, civilization, or religion. These instrumental approaches to power presuppose theories drawn from Marxian and Weberian traditions – from Gramsci and Althusser, from ideas about political parties as ‘houses of power’ and about rational-legal legitimacy as providing merely a democratic framework for interest struggle – but also from economic theories about rational choice. Such reductionism in political sociology is echoed by the subservient manner in which ‘weak programs’ in the sociology of culture (Alexander and Smith 2003) have treated meaning as the wagging tail of power – a subordination formulated in slightly different ways by the Birmingham school studies of Stuart Hall, the Foucaultian studies of governmentality, and neo-institutionalist studies of isomorphism, as well by earlier American work on ‘symbolic politics’ by such figures as Murray Edelman.

Neither political sociology nor weak cultural programs have been able to conceptualize key empirical processes that are central to understanding power in formally democratic societies. Inside the civil sphere, struggles for power take place as struggles for persuasion, as performances that unfold before an idealized audience of rational, responsive, and putatively solidary citizens. Gaining power depends on the outcome of struggles for symbolic domination in the civil sphere. It is cultural victory that determines control of the state, and, potentially, over every other noncivil sphere as well, such as the economy, religion, ethnic association, and family.

To understand and explain the symbolic communications that structure civil society, a strong theory of meaning-making is required. What is needed is a cultural sociology, not a sociology of culture, a strong, not a weak approach to social meaning. It only seems paradoxical that, in order to understand power, we must give relative autonomy to culture. But it is coding and narrating that channel the construction of political motives inside the civil sphere, smooth the pathways for political relations, and set up the framework for consequential institutional changes in society and state. Taking state power in a democratic society is a struggle for position vis-à-vis the binary discourse of civil society. The goal of those who struggle for political power is to identify themselves, their campaign ‘issues’, and their broader ideology with the sacred side of this binary and to project convincing accounts of their opponents as embodying anti-civil evil. Those who struggle for power seek to expand these cultural constructions beyond their immediate ideological and organizational groupings, to become iconic objects of emotive identification for populations far and wide.

Creating and sculpting the image

Collective representations and ritual

To struggle for power in a democratic society one must become a collective representation (Durkheim 1951 [1911]); one must become a symbol of the civil sphere, but also of at least some of these other, extra civil spheres that generate nondemocratic, often primordial values that real existing civil spheres are compelled also to represent. To become a symbolic representation in the struggle for power is not only to achieve this status with one’s immediate supporters and party group, but to project this symbolic stature throughout the civil sphere and also outside of it, over a much wider domain. Struggles for power project meanings and styles to citizen audiences that are layered from close by to far away, and which are fragmented in all the familiar demographic

ways. Winning power depends on creating performances that successfully breach some of these great divides.

What is a politician? He or she is a collective representation, one that can be energized through a process of symbolic communication and, by this process, become a carrier of intense social energy. A former comrade from Barack Obama's early Chicago days, interviewed by *The New York Times*, remembers the young community-organizer as somebody who displayed a remarkable 'energizing capacity to connect with the people in these neighborhoods.'³ Political life is a back and forth process of 'behavioural' interaction and symbolic communication, one in which psychic energy flows between symbolic public texts and actual living and breathing persons. This explains why, even in the virtual age, politicians must mingle, and be seen to mingle, with real voters, why they shake so many real hands and speak not only digitally but in all their throaty sweatiness to throbbing and heaving rallies.

Candidates experience and channel the energy of human contact. These ritual interactions are textually mediated, and they are televised and circulated as symbolic images in turn. The sounds and images of audiences whistling and applauding, and of beaming, back slapping and fist pumping candidates, reflect this energy back to the candidate and upward, via communicative institutions, into the broader civil sphere. This circulating energy cannot be supplied simply from studio performance. While digitally produced or even created political performances are, of course, technically feasible, in a civil society it would be considered immoral to employ them. Nor would they trigger the recursive processes of symbolic representation central to the political sociology of democracy.

Political rallies can become pure, old-fashioned, fused performances – true rituals with the touching of hands to charismatic leaders, the tremendous effervescence of crowds flowing into a single symbol, the political collective representation. In the Presidential campaign season, this ritual begins with small groups in living rooms in Iowa and New Hampshire, morphs into larger settings after primary victories and defeats, and culminates in the carefully choreographed scenes of mass hysteria, laced with ritualized *gravitas*, that characterize party conventions. In the personalized contact process that defines the ground game of political campaigns, 'advance men' are crucial. It is their aim to create fused performances. Campaign image-makers organize the candidate's websites, write blogs, send reporters spinning messages throughout the 24-hour news cycle and millions of digital messages daily to contributors and fans, and meet face-to-face with journalists and influence peddlers in private and in public. They aim to extend this ritual experience, via the mass media, to larger audiences of voters.

Reporting on Hillary Clinton's, 7 June 2008, concession speech in the historic National Building Museum in Washington, DC, CNN's Wolf Blitzer remarks, 'We're listening to this crowd getting excited,' publicly interpreting the convention center's immense interior space, with its vaulting modernist arches, as 'dramatic and imposing,' and 'most appropriate' for the sad and sweet denouement of a powerful and controversial campaign. Blitzer also observes, as Senator Clinton addresses her cheering fans, how she is elevated on a platform high above them. It is, indeed, as one of Blitzer's colleagues observes, as if the politician were in a great church, offering a sermon to devoted worshippers. 'Hillary' – the chants are ubiquitous – offers thanks to her staff and all the volunteer workers, the priests and the laity of her political religion. We witness the production of myth, of fallen heroes and martyrs in the struggle for civil power. The next day, *The New York Times* described the event, as 'a dramatic – and

at times theatrical – end to a candidacy that transfixed the country,’ observing how ‘many of her supporters watched, some weeping, turning out to witness and appreciate the history of this latest turn in the Clintons’ story.’⁴

The ritual nature of fused political performances, the manner in which deeply affected, breathless journalists break down the barrier between actor and audience, and the extraordinary collective energy and symbolic power produced – these were quintessentially expressed much later that summer in Mile High Stadium in Denver, Colorado, when Barack Obama formally accepted the Democratic nomination for the Presidency. Following are notes taken from MSNBC television coverage in the afternoon and evening of that day, 28 August 2008. They might be entitled ‘Building Fusion.’ We begin with the run-up that mixes religion with entertainment.

Looking forward to the big moment, the Reverend Al Sharpton evaluates its potential significance – and simultaneously tries to ensure its performative success – by quoting from Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, delivered 45 years before on this very day. Presenting it as a kind of eerie adumbration of the Obama candidacy, Sharpton recalls how King proclaimed his faith that ‘someday people will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.’ Sharpton tells MSNBC’s David Gregory that Obama’s victory in the primary is perfect proof that King’s prophecy had come true. Congressman John Lewis is interviewed. The former civil rights leader had been there that day to hear King’s speech. Lewis proclaims ‘we are dedicated this evening to Reverend King and his Dream speech.’ There follows a compelling and evocative video about King and his tragic heroic quest. We are reminded of his iconic face, and how he believed in the glory both of God and the American civil sphere. Bernice King, daughter of recently deceased Coretta Scott King, offers the benediction. Keith Olbermann, the MSNBC co-anchor, narrates a video about racial discrimination that focuses on the great Yankee player Elston Howard. Chris Matthews, the other co-anchor, frames the world-historical importance of what follows, declaring that the USA will become ‘the first Western Hemisphere country’ nominating a person of African origin for president. Olbermann equates the nomination with such other ‘completely unforeseen’ and dramatic historical events as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Apartheid. The two anchors exchange remarks about historical significance. Matthews calls this ‘an amazingly democratic moment.’ The essence of democracy is that everything is open. The struggle for power is contingent; nobody knows what will happen in advance. ‘Elections matter,’ he observes. ‘If you sit at home’ and don’t participate, you are ‘an idiot in the Greek sense,’ somebody with no connection to the polity. Olbermann characterizes Obama’s nomination as an undeniable demonstration of the possibility for ‘concrete change,’ something that is ‘real for many, many people.’ For David Gregory, it ‘represents the future, not the past’ – it’s ‘change, that’s the key.’

This inflationary framing is momentarily brought back to earth by NBC correspondent Andrea Mitchell, who reveals what she clearly believes to be the ‘wires’ behind the evening’s event. ‘The whole point of coming,’ Mitchell says, is ‘organizing,’ getting attendees to sign up to do grunt campaigning work. This is ‘a massive recruitment effort.’ You get a free ticket if you agree to do six hours of volunteering. This is good reporting in a professional journalist sense. It would reduce the event from rhetoric and dreams to planning and base. It seems to imply fakery, not idealism, and exchange, not altruism. Yet Mitchell’s analysis seems symbolically out of place even if empirically true. A disbelieving Matthews warns, ‘Andrea, this seems to me immensely Machiavellian.’

What follows is a black singing group, ‘Will.i.am & John Legend’ performing ‘Yes We Can.’ For the commentators, and perhaps many viewers, these segue events are beginning to appear way ‘too black,’ too enmeshed in a minority, and to some degree still stigmatized, subculture. What about Obama’s appeal to whites? Olbermann obliquely addresses this performative anxiety, observing ‘that’s one of the dangers here’, the ‘need to keep these people entertained for two hours’ before the evening’s main speakers

arrive. Then something rather surprising happens. This anticipatory framing is taken out of black-versus-white, out of the world of entertainment, and pulled from the past and anniversary to the future and celebration. Joe Scarborough, an influential MSNBC conservative commentator, proclaims ‘I can’t think of any event that approaches this. They are hitting a home run here, I’ll tell you that. After this speech, none of us will have any questions at all about what “change” means.’

Asked by Matthews about John McCain’s sarcastic references to stadiums and celebrities, Scarborough reminds his viewers that ‘JFK took over the LA coliseum’ for his acceptance speech in 1960, repeating information published earlier that day in the *Times*. ‘I need to tell you again,’ Scarborough insists, ‘that this is the most extraordinary event I’ve ever seen. Watch for Colorado to swing Obama’s way.’ This outspokenly conservative commentator has been at least temporarily transformed – taken in, fused by – the dramaturgy and meaning of today’s event. His remarks suggest the performative power of the occasion, its cathartic capacity after the up and down narrative of the Convention’s previous days.

Coverage turns to MSNBC ‘youth reporter’ Luke Russert interviewing John Legend, the rap singer who wrote and performed ‘Yes We Can.’ Articulate and forceful, when asked about the celebrity attacks on Obama by McCain and others, Legend warns conservatives, ‘Don’t be jealous because you haven’t aroused emotion.’ Russert describes the song as a media sensation, with 15 million hits on YouTube alone. Paraphrasing one of Legend’s responses, Russert suggests that what he meant to say was this: ‘You boomers think seeing a woman or black in power is a big deal, but to us it isn’t. For us, it’s not, “cause we’ve grown up with this.”’

The news moves back to the stage where Sheryl Crow is rocking out. After projecting this bite of popular culture, attention moves back to Olbermann, who interviews Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. ‘What a throwback to yesterday,’ Olbermann remarks, referring to the 1968 convention over which Daley’s father had presided, which was marked by youth culture and political protest. The camera puts Sheryl Crow in skin-tight white jeans and cowboy hat, still singing her heart out, on half screen. Daley answers by mentioning Michele Obama, asserting that ‘she connected’, as had Hillary. He insists ‘it’s the economy’ and likens Obama to FDR. Matthews asks, ‘How did you in Illinois manage to elect two black Americans senators?’ Daley answers, ‘We have an open society.’

Stevie Wonder is now performing, singing about unity, ‘the united people of these United States.’ He calls out, ‘now everybody repeat after me: Barack Obama, yes we can, yes we can,’ and the crowd enthusiastically joins in. Great applause. ‘We love you Stevie.’ Stevie replies, ‘I gotta do this, I gotta do this, I gotta do this one: “Signed, Sealed, and Delivered.” I’m yours.’ Here, at the center of contemporary popular culture, African-Americans are fully incorporated and authoritative. Stevie Wonder has been Barakobamad. The camera shifts back to the television booth, where Rachel Maddow and Nora O’Donnell, and Eugene Robinson, two white women and an African-American reporter from the Washington Post, are swinging and dancing to ‘Signed, Sealed, and Delivered.’ Camera scans to the white and black audience, standing and awkwardly swaying back and forth to the same music. There is fusion, but not entirely. The ultra-conservative MSNBC commentator Pat Buchanan wears a Darth Vader look, sporting wrap around sunglasses. Alongside sinister, he looks bemused. ‘God bless our country, the United States of America,’ he intones sarcastically. Don’t you want to join ‘the MSNBC dance back up band?’ Olbermann inquires. He suggests that, while Buchanan won’t dance, he has contributed to the scene by looking a lot like one of the ‘Blues Brothers.’

Moving this ritual build-up closer to the struggle for power, the focused attention shifts in the next scene to Al Gore, the first hard luck losing Democratic Presidential candidate after Clinton stepped down.

Gore is now the straight greenie, the techie, the Academy Award winner. Democracy gives us an opportunity to change, he exclaims. Elections do matter. The 2000 election did, too. Let's not allow that to happen again. This election matters so much. Throughout his remarks, as with others throughout the convention, the camera revealingly shifts back and forth between the speaker and the individual faces of the audience, to see if they are connecting or defusing, do or do not respond. When Gore speaks, we see the audience laughing, joking, and shouting. We cannot continue, he thunders, with an 'indifference to facts,' subordinating the general good to the benefit of the few. Global warming is a 'planetary emergency,' and the coming apocalypse. McCain has allowed his party to browbeat him into not supporting corrective measures. Gore attacks 'the special interests who have controlled' the Republican Party 'lock, stock, and barrel.' We can restore the civil sphere, with solidarity and rationality, too. 'You understand that this election marks a clean change from the politics of partisanship and division.' Drawing a direct parallel between Lincoln and Obama, Gore asserts that our present crisis is as great as the Civil War. Obama represents 'the best of America.' He 'will restore *e pluribus Unum*' and 'allow us Americans speak with moral authority to other nations.'

The commentators now evaluate fragments that have been supplied from Obama's upcoming speech. Noting its confident, and sometimes even aggressive tone, Olbermann says this is 'an alpha male moment', recalling Bill Clinton's 1992 acceptance speech, which proclaimed that if 'Bush doesn't want to use the powers of the presidency, I'll do it.' Matthews continues to deepen the moment. 'This is not something cute and personal, this is something serious and powerful.' The speech shows 'here is my order of battle, here's what I bring to the table.' It 'will be a dramatic and compelling speech by Barack Obama, by all accounts, at the top of the hour.' Olbermann warns, 'you can't just read from this and get what it's going to be like. You need to think stylistically because of the optics.' Buchanan concedes, 'it may be the most decisive moment of the entire election, it's that important a speech.' He gives it great credence, noting its 'gravitas.' Rachel Maddow: 'Honestly, Pat is right about the performative challenge of the speech. It is LONG. How will he be able to manage that?' Buchanan replies, 'You've got to "talk through" the applause.' Olbermann adds, 'this is his voice.' Buchanan: 'This is written for the ear, not for the eye,' it's not Al Gore. 'It should be a tough man's speech,' he says.

Camera scans the crowd, which now looks, after the sun has set and the stadium filled to overflowing, like a festival or a football game. Seventy-five thousand small American flags waving, grandmothers and children, blond-haired All-American girls and Ivy League-jacketed preppies, men and women and families in every color, waving signs like 'Latinos for Barack.' Illinois Senator Durbin steps to the podium to offer the formal introduction. There is 'hunger for more authenticity,' a need 'to renew the faith of the American people in a leader.' Because 'Americans want to believe.' Durbin explains, 'I've been close to Barack Obama for many years, but now, many Americans feel close to this man.' Averting fusion, he is adumbrating Obama's performative success. Obama has 'judgment' and 'wisdom,' and with him 'the future of our nation is in the hands of hard working Americans, who want to believe that America's best days are still to come. Tonight, as the stadium's lights are going dark, we will come to the dawning of the new day!' If we accept his 'message ... that the greatness of America will return,' we 'can turn the page, and welcome a new generation. Yes American can, yes we can.' Barack Obama and Joe Biden 'will lead us to a better place and we will be by their side every step of the way.' This is a religious, transcendental speech, about passing from the evil past and the mundane present into the sacred space of the future, making the dream come true, and being led by the hand by caring and prophetic leaders.

Now that he has properly been introduced, his imminent speech already lauded for its power and meaning, his person adulated in salvatory terms, the nominee himself emerges. Barack Obama walks purposefully up to the podium.

As Obama delivers his speech, the camera scans to show whites, blacks, old men and youngsters nodding in affirmation as he speaks. Obama directly challenges the withering recent criticism of his opponent. 'I don't know what kind of lives John McCain thinks celebrities lead, but this is mine.' Offering many specific proposals for civil repair, Obama continually moves from the practical and mundane to the sacred promises of the civil sphere – 'that's the idea of America, the promise that we rise and fall together, that I am my brother's keeper, my sister's keeper.'

The commentarial response that follows is filled with praise. Mitchell likens his words to those of the President character in Aaron Sorkin's productions *The American President* and *West Wing*. The factual and the fictional media of communication have met halfway, in a merging of poetry and prose. 'The Hell with my critics,' Matthews says, declaring 'I think what he said was about us, and that's why we care. Our strength is not in our money or military, but in the American promise.' 'Let me tell you how he did this,' Matthews says. Obama asked, 'Was my upbringing a celebrity's upbringing? How dare you say, this election is a test of patriotism?' Obama was declaring 'Enough! He supplied not just inspiration, but all the specifics that were asked of him – 29 specific policy pledges and at least 19 failures of the McCain campaign. He supplied four direct punches to George Bush and four more to the Republican Party in general. No shots were left unthrown. There has been an extraordinary laying down of the glove.'

So the commentators are answering Obama's critics for him. Their hermeneutical power is being contributed to his performative effect. Olbermann asks, 'as political theatre, where doesn't this rank in our recent history?' Brian Williams answers by making reference, once again, to the Presidential prose of Aaron Sorkin. Chris Todd, MSNBC political analyst, says 'I was struck by the little nods here to political responsibility.' Obama is 'trying to appeal to Missouri [sic], not Missouri. He is saying I'm gong to fight. The toughness of the speech is what's still going to stand out.' McCain won't 'know how to react to this speech. I'll tell you, I don't know how that the Republican Party is going to be able to go against this show.' Tom Brokaw: 'Barack felt a certain license to throw a punch back. There was something personal and combative here that I haven't got so far.... This guy is just a step above no matter what you think of him or his politics.' After 'three days of *mishigas*,' Williams observes, 'we can now look at this as a narrative, a four-day narrative.' Matthews turns to his normally cool, and decidedly moderate colleague Michele Bernard. This African-American journalist offers that immediately after the speech she went alone to a room backstage, 'so I could weep alone.' Matthews asks, 'is this nomination of Obama a "willingness of the heart"? Are we beyond an ethnic nation? There was a sea of black, white, and Asian faces. Is the era of ethnic politics over?' Iowa did it first, he recounts, on the day of Obama's early victory. Bernard responds that 'Iowa was the greatest day in our nation's history,' adding 'America will never be the same again.' Mitchell recalls how 'people jumped to their feet and started shouting when he attacked McCain.' She testifies 'I've never witnessed anything quite like this. The stagecraft was so phenomenal. I don't know how they could have made it any better.'

These remarks are repeated in *The New York Times* coverage the next day.⁵ According to media constructions, the fusion inside the stadium generated not only local ritual but amplified outside, gaining the largest audience in the history of televised conventions, larger by one-third than the Beijing Olympics opening night. This suggests that the television commentators gasping, ah-ing, and oh-ing over the previous evening's scene must have appeared as felicitous to many.

Becoming a hero: the mythical narrative

In a major profile about Obama's political qualities, the *Times* reporter Michael Powell explains his performative effectiveness in terms of identification, a quality demanded for successful performance: Obama 'has the gift of making people see themselves in him.' Powell then supplies an empirical description of how this trick is

turned. Obama produces psychological identification by virtue of his narrative's textual qualities. Obama is a 'protean political figure, inspiring devotion in supporters who see him as a *transformative* leader.' It is 'as if there were a Barack-the-immaculate-pol quality to his rise.' Here Powell employs allusive terms that evoke the emergence of a biblical prophet. Obama, he writes, 'has taken just 11 years to run the course from state senator to the first black presumptive nominee who holds thousands spellbound.'⁶

Why is a prophetic narrative necessary? Every struggle for big time political power is narrated in terms of crisis and salvation. Characters can become heroes, after all, only by overcoming great odds, by resolving overwhelming challenges. According to our would-be Presidents, Americans face a unique moment in history. There are unprecedented dangers and opportunities, a world-historical crisis domestically and internationally that threatens to derail America's mythical history. National collapse looms. Only during such a 'crisis of our times' (Alexander 2003) can heroes be made. Electoral defeat will bring apocalypse. Not just survival, but transcendence and refounding are at stake.

As Obama declares in his post-primary acceptance speech on 4 June 2008, 'this is our time, this is our moment.' He draws a sharp and redolent red line between the dark past and the bright golden future. He presents himself as a force that mediates darkness and light. He will purify the American project and pull it from the past to the future, into the bright sunshine of a new day. Drawing from the same culture structure, John Kennedy, too, had once memorably promised symbolic transformation. 'A new day is dawning,' he declared in his 1960 inaugural address; 'the torch has been passed to a new generation.' As for Obama, a few days after his June 4th speech, he wove this salvatory theme into a major economic address.⁷ Following are notes from that widely publicized event.

'Mr. Obama said again that a McCain presidency would be a continuation of President Bush.' Obama inserts his opponent into a narrative framing of past, present, and future. To be in the present, a position that allows you to reach to the future, a political actor needs to break sharply with the past. Obama insists that McCain is only nominally in the present: his real attachment is to the past. 'We've been there once,' Obama warns about the Republican presidency, and 'we're not going back.' *Times* writer: 'Obama posed the choice between him and McCain as a fundamental one between the future and the past, the ground on which he hopes to fight his campaign.' Obama: 'This is the choice we face right now, a choice between more of the same ... or change ... Not an argument between left or right ... It is time to try something new.' McCain thinks we are already in the future: 'He says we've made great progress in our economy these past eight years.'

In this economic address, Obama inserts economic 'facts' into the binary of then and now, past and future. This shows the role of binary historical divisions. Heroes are constructed by inserting a political actor into world-historical time. It's not only about saying somebody is a hero – this rarely happens as such. It's quite simply and most basically about narrating TIME, about constructing a fundamental and significant temporality, and weighting it with immense importance, significance, if possible. This radically discontinuous temporal narrative is deepened by a coding that pollutes the opponent as anti-civil. Time becomes vital, and the salvatory narrative possible, to the degree that the other candidate is truly and deeply dangerous, such that electing him would plunge us into an apocalyptic situation. If the other candidate is elected, the progress of the nation will be halted, and we will not be able to move into future time. During the 1996 Presidential contest, Bill Clinton promised to build a bridge to the 21st century, something that Bob Dole could not.

To become a hero, one must establish a sense of great and urgent necessity. The moment is precarious and burdened with terrible significance. America has fallen on tough times, the Dream lies in tatters. The nation has fallen off the hill. We have been desecrated and polluted by the second Bush Presidency. We must be purified, and for this we need a new hero. Obama presents himself as having overcome great personal adversity on the road to auditioning for this position of national hero. Born into a deeply polluted racial group, he was inspired by an earlier African-American prophet-hero whose speech about the dream of justice had become deeply etched in the collective consciousness of American civil society. After Obama secured the nomination, on 4 June, joyous proclamations of imminent salvation were offered by African-Americans and circulated by the communicative institutions of American civil society. His victory presaged an end to race hatred and the realization of the true solidarity promised by American civil society. In Africa, Obama's Kenyan relatives and their countrymen described his ascension as signaling redemption, the possibility of global solidarity.

When Obama spoke after informally receiving the nomination, the present became a rhetorical pivot between the enslaving past and redemptive future. 'Generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs for the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal.'⁸ An Op-Ed columnist heard 'echoes of the gospels and Genesis,' recalling the candidate's Wesleyan speech a week earlier, in which he had openly declared that 'our individual salvation depends on collective salvation.'⁹ The next day, the *Times* ran a large photo depicting Obama as a Jesus-like figure offering salvation. He is elevated above a teeming crowd, with hundreds of hands stretching out to touch him. He has become a charismatic vessel, filled with the sacred promise of civil repair.

To become a hero is to enter into myth. It is to cease being merely a mortal man (or woman) and to develop a second immortal body in Kantorowicz's sense (Kantorowicz 1957), an iconic surface that allows audiences an overpowering feeling of connection with the transcendental realm of a nation's idealistic political life that lies just underneath. Obama has begun to grow this second body. He is no longer just a human being – a skinny guy with big ears, a writer, an ordinary man – but a hero. As a hero, an icon, this symbolic body will not die. It will be remembered no matter what happens to the man. Most political figures cannot grow such second skin. They are respected or liked, or even deferred to, but their second body, the mythical public body, is weak and puny, so they remain politician rather than myth. Overshadowed and whimpified by their opponent, they are 'wounded' in political battles, revealing their mortal natures. Jimmy Carter was wounded by Ted Kennedy's late primary run, and injured further by Teddy's overwhelming and vainglorious speech at the Democratic convention. Carter faltered in the general election campaign, watching helplessly as the once mundane Ronald Reagan grew a sacralizing and mythical second body. Bill Clinton-versus-George H.W. Bush ran this play in reverse. Decades before, Richard Nixon's five o'clock shadow, not properly covered by make-up, darkened and polluted him, allowing John Kennedy to shine like a bright young God during their decisive Presidential debate.

As the actual events of the primary are winding down – it 'concludes Tuesday' – the *Times* alludes to a routine narration. There has, Harwood writes, 'developed such a reliable story line that pundits can recite in their sleep.' This narrative is about the two 'firsts' almost tearing the party apart, the first woman and the first black.

But, while this ‘story’ has a ‘numbing familiarity,’ this shouldn’t obscure ‘what makes this nomination singular.’ In explaining this singularity, the narrative first thickens in such a manner that the primary narrative can become world-historical and thus mythic. Indeed, the primary campaign surely ‘stands alone in the history of American presidential politics,’ so much so that ‘there’s nothing that’s remotely close’ to it. It’s the depth of democratic participation, which has achieved a transcendental level. Harwood explains that the primary process started in efforts of Progressive era reformers ‘to give voters, rather than party bosses, a greater voice.’ But this reform didn’t really matter that much until now. Only now has the democratic promise of the primary idea paid off. The voters have triumphed (liberty) finally over the bosses (repression). The primary process is ‘shattering records ... the scale of this thing is just extraordinary ... their performance all the more striking ... it defies the normal laws of political gravity ... remarkable.’¹⁰

The primaries have defied the natural laws of the world, not only the natural corruption of society’s social laws. The media weaves this mythical tale about Barack and Hillary, whose supporters together have made democracy real, and for the first time.

Cultural agency and scripting

From the perspective of the audience, the hero politician is anything but self-made. Neither coded nor narrated, her heroic stature is natural, essentialized. For the citizen-audience, it is simply a matter of learning who the candidate for power really is, and has always been. From the perspective of the politician struggling to take power, however, becoming a collective representation is a project, an action requiring extraordinary agency. He becomes a character in his own script, writing a story in the unfolding of his personal life time. Such self-fashioning must be responsive to unending contingency, even as it strives to maintain the arc of its coded narrative themes.

Obama entered the campaign for the Presidency with a script that was public in an unusually formal way – his autobiographical book, *Dreams from my Father*. Since then, not only he but the reporters covering him have folded every political contingency into these already existing narrative strands, evaluating the meaning of new events against these background representations.

Obama’s community-organizing was a vital part of his self-fashioning. He began this soon-to-be public phase of his *Bildung* two years after his Columbia college graduation and concluded it, three years later, on his way to Harvard Law School. At the farewell reception for Obama at the Altgeld Gardens project in south Chicago, he told the small, 60-person gathering that he would eventually return to Chicago ‘to pursue a career in public life.’¹¹ The story is reconstructed by *The New York Times* from interviews with those who were there, as part of the paper’s ongoing effort to create some narrative framing for Barack-the-Immaculate’s mysterious early life. But it was Obama himself who first scripted these events inside the frame of his autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*. His stint as an organizer was not important because of the successes he achieved on the ground. ‘We made very little progress,’ Obama recalled.¹² Its importance derived from its being part of a *telos*, not a means-end relation – as culture, not as practical reason. The years represented a stage in the Obama story, a step in his *Bildung*, his moral development. As the *Times* reporter does not fail to note, this relatively brief stint of Chicago community-organizing occupied fully one-third of the 442 page public narrative that was devised to script it. A political campaign builds upon already-existing informal and formal scripting. Its aim is to instantiate these background representations in political time and space, to create an

iconic power that condenses memories, dreams, and interpretations into the surface image and depth meaning of a powerful hero.

The image as object and strategy

Staffers and reporters are deeply concerned with the 'image' of the candidate, speaking about it as if it were an objective, rather than a subjective thing. Certainly, it is a social fact in Durkheim's sense, a collectively constituted representation whose contours, once established, are independent of the power of any single individual, no matter how powerful. It is because of this only seemingly paradoxical combination of massive objectivity and insistent subjectivity – of social determinism and individual agency – that 'controlling the image' becomes a matter of overwhelming concern to every political campaign. To encounter the image is to recall a collective representation that transcends the candidate as an individual. It is to engage his second, immortal body, the one that can make an ordinary and mortal politician into a king. The image must be kept pure and unsullied. It must be handled and framed. Campaigns project a protected space around their candidate, a sacred aura that must not be profaned. They fight to keep it inviolate; they struggle to keep every possible polluting contact at bay.

In June, Politico.com revealed that campaign staffers had removed two headscarf-wearing Muslim women from the background of an Obama photo op.¹³ Faced with this exposure of apparent deceit and possible intolerance, the campaign apologized, even while it defended its right to be 'tight' and 'vigilant.' Control is necessary, they explained, in order to fight against 'erroneous information that has spread on the internet' identifying the Senator as Muslim himself. While it is good strategy to defend the pure image from pollution, it is bad strategy when such efforts to preserve the sacred end up polluting it, allowing the candidate to be constructed in antidemocratic terms. To neutralize such mistakes, political staffs open up space between the candidate and the campaign. Acknowledging their 'mistake,' Obama staffers maintained it was their own, not the candidate's, asserting it 'doesn't reflect the orientation of the campaign.' The *Times* reporter explained that the incident 'pointed to pitfalls the campaign faces as it moves into the general election and seeks to maintain control of Obama's image by tightly managing his public appearances.' Despite this temporary setback, such control must still be maintained. While Obama staffers acknowledge the battle had been lost, they assert that the war against 'misinformation' will not be. A senior aide remarks, 'we're going to deal with that very aggressively through a number of mediums.'

Obama's apparent decision to allow his children to be interviewed on TV reveals a similar dynamic. On the one hand, the interviews are effective, projecting the sacred and innocent space of the family circle around sometimes wavering public images of the candidate himself. However, a backlash ensues that threatens pollution. Why did Obama bring his family into the public sphere, his small children into harm's way? Obama blames his staff, even as he acknowledges that it was his own decision. He employs the ambiguous royal we. Even as they exposed this slip, journalists recorded their own and others' admiration for how successfully Obama's campaign had, in fact, been able to assert control over the candidate's image.

Yet another illustration surfaces when Obama's staff welcomes reporters and photographers to meet with the campaign's new national security team, composed primarily of retired military officers. It is revealed that staffers actually had barred

cameras, though not reporters, when Obama had mixed with a large gathering of black civic leaders only days before. They had also recently refused to provide names of African-American religious figures with whom Obama had privately met during a visit to Chicago. Still, efforts to control the image are widely accepted, and often admired. In response to the spike of harsh questioning about Michele Obama's patriotism and temperament, the campaign had orchestrated a series of 'friendly' television appearances and a 'flattering spread in the pages of *Us Weekly*.' It was reported that such efforts had 'won compliments from political professionals of both parties.' The Obama campaign exhibited a 'high level of discipline.' It had matched 'the stagecraft that was once so successfully practiced by the campaigns of Bush to the envy ... of Democrats.'¹⁴

Politics as war by symbolic means

Struggles for the Presidency are not games. There is too much ultimate power at stake. Struggles for civil power to control the state are as vicious and aggressive as they are culturally and legally allowed to be. Organizers and observers alike compare political campaigns with war. They are plotted and remembered in terms of battles won and lost. 'Now that the primary season is over,' Senator Schumer announces, 'there is going to be a clear voice' for the Democrats: the party can finally begin 'setting up the stark contrast with Mr. McCain.' The *Times* reports that, 'with the Democratic stage to himself for the first time, Senator Barack Obama opened a two-week tour of battleground states on Monday, attacking senator John McCain.'¹⁵

For these reasons, 'partisanship' is the most fraught and ambiguous word in democratic politics. Solidarity is the *sine qua non* of the civil sphere, yet it is threatened by the agonism of the struggle for the political power to represent it. Intense and often sharply hostile conflict is unleashed in the name of a broad, inclusive, and pacific civil solidarity. Yet, sponsoring and promoting periodic bouts of political agonism allows the civil sphere to maneuver through complexity and to finesse fragmentation, to reconcile if never to eliminate opposing ideological and social interests. After these fierce battles are over, the winner becomes the representative of the civil sphere inside the state.

This paradox is not only conceptual. It is experienced as deeply dangerous. Electoral battles challenge the fellow feeling of solidarity and mutual identification upon which civil society depends. Yet, if being elected means convincing voters that your candidate truly represents the values of the civil sphere, then partisan attacks on the other candidate as much less civil, and indeed as anti-civil, must be the unwritten rule in every significant political campaign. As *The New York Times* reminds its reader, today's partisan hostility 'may be no different than what prompted allies of Quincy Adams to run searing attack pamphlets ... nearly 200 years ago: It works.'¹⁶ Nonetheless, there is continuous monitoring of the invisible line separating 'healthy' and 'normal' party conflict from pathologically anti-civil faction. Crossing this line is what 'dirty tricks' are all about, when 'off-line' and 'under the table' expenditures pay for plumbers' operations and swift boat ads. There are continuous demands to maintain decorum and civility, which often are not met. In the American political system, these issues were crystallized in Watergate, the legendary occasion that remains etched in the collective memory of the civil sphere. It remains a memory of how partisanship can turn into anti-civil hostility, and of how even the best of democracies are sometimes done in. As the *Times* observes, candidates might promise nice 'only to behave otherwise when the

battle finally joins.’ Despite their promises, Obama and McCain are ‘locked in a minute by minute fight ... with rhetoric that can be as harsh and misleading as that of any previous campaign.’ ‘Behind the scenes are amped-up campaign war rooms that between them send dozens of attack email messages to reporters on a given day.’ Obama reassures his supporters at a rally: ‘If they bring a knife to the fight, we bring a gun.’ A line from the *Untouchables*, which demonstrates how party conflict challenges the plasticity of the discourse of civil society.

Agonism is exacerbated because the discourse of civil society is binary. If meaning is difference, then political legitimacy is even more so. Making oneself civilly pure, and one’s opponents as anti-civil and impure, is the stuff of which victory is made. It is the irony at the heart of democratic politics.

Doing difference

The cultural construction of voters

The voting public, as such, is not physically active in this power struggle, which is directed by tightly organized campaign staffs, mediated by more and less civil associations, and fueled by enormous flows of money. Yet voters, if not physically co-present, are *imaginatively* central. As coded, narrated, and rhetorically projected, voters constitute the central audiences of political campaigns. They are held to be rational and independent and capable of immensely wise decisions. They are the sacred of the sacred. According to the democratic myth, such enlightened citizens simply do not make mistakes. In any particular campaign season, voters may be constructed as angry, depressed, happy with the status quo, or anxious about the future. But such passions are taken to be expressions of their enlightened autonomy, of their rock solid sense of the public interest upon which American democracy rests. Sometimes, of course, voters do support demagogues and liars, but it is universally held that they have done so not because they themselves are weak or dishonest. Rather, they have been knowingly and irresponsibly misled, typically by ‘the other side.’ Provided with false or inadequate information, voters have been unable to act on their best instincts and rational interests.

Those who struggle for power in the civil sphere must always show themselves as studiously respectful of voters. A candidate can never be seen as insulting or talking down to them. To engage in the former is to be elitist; to engage in the latter is to be pandering. Elitism and pandering are qualities that disqualify a candidate from representing the civil sphere. Voters have the last word in the struggle for political power. On voting day, by a ‘magical process’ that is usually hidden from view, the secret individual votes of interested citizens are transformed into the publicly proclaimed general will. The beneficent force of civil solidarity reemerges to calm the passions and interests of potentially divisive partisan struggle.¹⁷

Those who fail to win the vote are constructed in a post hoc manner as having deserved their fates. Their character, campaign, and stance on issues were rejected by John Q public. No matter their earlier, pre-election days of respect and glory; they are now polluted, having fallen on the wrong side of the civil, anti-civil divide. Listen to Governor Bill Richardson’s post-primary indictment of the Clinton campaign. Once a fervent supporters of Hillary Clinton, Richardson now opines that ‘what hurt them was their sense of entitlement that the presidency was theirs and all the acolytes fall in line.’ Because Hillary Clinton was rejected by the voters, she must now be situated as outside the civil sphere, or at least as peripheral to its central core. Richardson

suggests that the Clintons were not democratic but arrogant, demanding subservience rather than facilitating autonomy. They put themselves above the voters, taking them for granted until it was too late. Even when the putatively arrogant Hillary finally did energetically court Democratic voters, late in her primary campaign, she was accused of pandering, of deceptively becoming a 'working-class hero' rather than speaking truth to working-class stereotypes. She was also accused of being overly dependent on her husband, subordinating herself to his pettiness and temper and his seemingly insidious racial slurs.

The cultural construction of candidates

In civil society, in order to become a hero, a protagonist must be placed at the center of America's *democratic* myth. What the political protagonist stories depends upon the binary discourse of civil society. Hillary comes to symbolize equality and mobility, a working-class hero, Rosie the Riveter, and a superwoman breaking the glass ceiling. Barack becomes the great emancipator. Calm and reasonable, he is a black Abraham Lincoln promising a more profound and expansive solidarity. McCain is the wounded prisoner of war who breaks the bonds of enslavement and roars back to a corruption-fighting, maverick, and newly altruistic life. He bucks social pressures and material inducements to do what he thinks is moral and right.

A major scripting challenge emerges when Obama announces that he will withdraw from public financing, the major effort at post-Watergate civil repair, a strenuous if not terribly effective effort to control monetary influence upon the struggle for civil power. Symbolizing a democratic approach to the struggle for power, it was a funding system that Obama had always publicly embraced, to which McCain himself had also contributed. Obama's aides acknowledge that this abandonment 'might tarnish' him.¹⁸ Obama had adumbrated his doubts about public financing ever since his online fundraising capacity became evident, but he had promised not to abandon it. So, his honesty and ethics are apparently threatened here, primary qualities of the discourse of civil society. Abandoning public financing seems to threaten democratic control over the struggle for power. It will 'likely transform the landscape of presidential elections, injecting hundreds of millions' of private money into what should be a civil process.

Obama moves immediately to defend his decision, which he claims, counterintuitively, actually brings him more closely into alignment with the discourse of civil society. He has abandoned his promise in order better to *defend* civil society against secretive and manipulative agonism and aggression! He also maintains that online fundraising is the most civil form of financing ever developed, that it is far fairer than the kinds that the public financing system had been erected against. Obama asserts, in fact, that he needs to maximize private gift giving so that he can properly defend himself against the anti-civil tactics of Republicans. His Republican opponents are 'masters at gaming the system and will spend millions smearing' him. (The Republican National Committee has already acquired \$50 million against the DMC's \$10 million.) McCain accuses Obama of lying and flip-flopping: He has completely reversed himself, gone back on his commitment to the American people. Again, Obama insists that online fund raising represents 'a new kind of politics.' *The New York Times* worries that Obama's turn to private money will intensify the agonism that marks the struggle for power, raising the dangerous possibility that partisanship will turn anti-civil antagonism. Obama will now be able to place ads outside the 'the traditional battle ground states.' A Republican strategist, observing that Obama had purchased ads in

Georgia, remarks 'I think the last guy to buy Georgia was General Sherman,' concluding 'it's a very aggressive election strategy.' Sherman was a nasty piece of work, a warrior who burned down Georgia in the finale of the (anti)civil war. *The New York Times* also warns of another possible anti-civil complication: Abandoning public money will force Obama to spend more time raising private money and less time 'meeting voters.'

The agonism of partisan party struggle is emolliated by efforts to connect it to the democratic side of civil discourse. Each party calls out the other's antagonism as an example of incivility, while describing its own aggressive response as legitimate self-defense. McCain says Obama is 'the type of politician who will advance himself before he advances the debate or the issues,' an old not a self-styled new politician.¹⁹ In a story handling that Obama, 'Carefully Hones his Partisan Image,' Michael Powell documents Obama becoming more partisan, despite his earlier claims for unity.²⁰ He reports but does not credit the campaign's claim that spins this new stance, not as partisan, but as simply exposing actual 'difference,' i.e., that it's a reflection of the reality of John McCain, not a new and more aggressive strategic framing.

Difference is a semiotic truism, but it is also one of the major strategies of politics. As campaigns work the binaries, they try to simplify the meaning of every issue that comes up, bringing it into semiotic alignment, on one side or the other of the great divide. Everything must be made clear or dirty, and, whenever possible, the newly pure and polluted folded into the narrative arc of historical transformation. This spinning machine comes to an end on 4th November, when the act of voting allows a purging catharsis, a spitting out of the negative, and a transformation of the individual into the collective will.

Until that day, politics is about creating difference, not overcoming it. The principal strategy for protecting the purity of your candidate's image is to categorize the other candidate in polluted ways. If we are to be coded as clean and democratic, he must be made dirty in the litany of tried and true, antidemocratic themes. If we are to be narrated as heroic, he must become a villain.

After securing the nomination, Obama announces notable policy shifts. He not only jettisoned public financing but publicly accepted the Supreme Court's decision that the Constitution gave citizens the right to carry guns. *The Times's* Michael Powell offers the factual observation that Obama has 'executed several policy pirouettes in recent weeks, each time landing more toward the center.'²¹ This has triggered challenges to Obama's scripted character, raising the question of whether these changes should be coded as responsible modulation or manipulative flip-flopping. Powell describes Obama as 'this most observant of politicians,' who has shown throughout career 'an appreciation for the virtues of political ambiguity.' He notes 'Obama has taken calibrated positions' on a number of issues in the last week. He characterizes his recent response to the Supreme Court as 'delphic,' giving a classically democratic Greek spin but also suggesting that Obama's justifications can neither be proved right or wrong. In America, if action is deemed pragmatic, virtue can be upheld. Powell quotes historian Robert Dallek. Because every Presidential candidate wants to 'be seen as pragmatic,' shifting doesn't mean 'they are utterly insincere.' Dallek recalls that even the revered FDR 'slipped and slid his way through the 1932 election,' and that 'Herbert Hoover called him a "chameleon on plaid".'

Obama carefully emphasizes the civil qualities of his motives and actions.²² He explains, for example, that the Supreme Court's decision 'reinforces that if we act responsibly' we can both protect individual rights and 'the community' alike. We can

Pragmatic Shifts	Flip-flops
Strong	Weak
Trustworthy	Untrustworthy
Flexible	Ideologically rigid
Sincere	Calculative
Authoritative	Indecisive

still make laws against ‘unscrupulous gun deals’ and keep ‘illegal hand guns off the streets.’ His aides rush to supply extenuating context, which while reaching for reality implicitly reveals a larger symbolic truth. ‘Flippers are important,’ they claim, only ‘when they reinforce a larger narrative about a candidate’s negative attributes.’ Still, the coding of contingent policy is open; it can slide easily to the antidemocratic side.

‘Operatives in both parties’ agree that candidate John Kerry’s ‘apparent equivocation on the Iraq war damaged his 2004 campaign.’ McCain staffers claim that Obama ‘is not a change agent but just a typical politician,’ in *The New York Times* words, a ‘stereotypically two-faced politician’ later in the story.’ For now, however, despite the candidates’ evident shifting of positions, voters in both parties give both high civil scores ‘for being honest and straightforward.’

Soon after, Obama suggests he will ‘refine’ his Iraq policies after meeting with military commanders later in the summer. One explanation is that the surge has been seeming to work. In ‘Obama Fuels Pullout Debate with Remarks’ (4 July), the *Times* carefully observes simply that ‘violence declines.’²³ Obama maintains that, in essence, his policy on Iraq has not changed. He insists that if Iraq were actually to be democratic – the goal that President Bush set for the surge – then not only must violence be ended but there must be political ‘reconciliation’ as well. It is on the failure to achieve the latter element of civil society that Obama rests the case for withdrawal now. Though violence has declined, Iraq is still not a democratic place. Withdrawing would also allow the American government to redistribute military spending to create more quality at home. Obama insists that he has always said that the pace of withdrawal will be responsive to commanders. He reaffirms his intention to ‘consult’ with commanders, but also his refusal to subordinate himself to them. It’s a matter of being rational and filtering all available ‘information.’ On his first day of office, he will give the Joint Chiefs a new mission, namely to end this war ‘responsibly, deliberately, but decisively.’ In other words, ending the war can be and will be civil.

In the early phases of the post-primary campaign, Obama faced the hermeneutical danger of flip-flopping. During this same period, McCain confronted the danger of not being able to do difference at all. Until late July, his campaign had not been able to get a handle on the negatives. If you can’t do difference, you can’t generate meaning, and without meaning the struggle for power will fail. Repeated stories assert that Obama is ahead because McCain has failed on this score. Reasons are offered as to why McCain has found this difficult to do. Obama has not been in office long; they need to be wary of unleashing charges that ‘conservatives have overstepped and been criticized for racially tinged remarks;’ it is said to be difficult to pollute ‘a movement candidate.’²⁴ Finally, McCain has promised to be civil, which inhibits an overly negative campaign. In fact, at this stage McCain is described as trying to be ‘respectful,’ and he’s been forced to distance himself from some of the more intemperate ads that

have been created and financed in his name. These stories also give Obama credit for preventing his own pollution. He 'has proved defter and more fleet-footed at counter-punching' than either Kerry or Gore. He has not been 'cowed' into apologizing.

By mid-July, these difficulties for McCain were well and truly overcome. He abandoned his scruples and began doing the binaries with a vengeance. It commenced with the advertising and internet campaign 'Obama is the world's biggest celebrity,' the desperate Hail Mary pass the Republicans threw just as Obama's European tour reached its zenith, the candidate hailed by a fused and adoring crowd of 200,000 in front of Berlin's Victory Arch, just steps away from the iconically democratic Brandenburg Gate. The performative injury to Obama Image was significant, sending the candidate's poll numbers into a tailspin from which they would not fully recover until mid-September. The celebrity became a mystery man who had appeared out of nowhere and would not tell the truth. He palled around with terrorists; he was not a true American; he was anti-American. When Obama responded that he would not answer the Republicans' 'negative campaigning' with his own, he sustained his image as a hero who held to the sacred ground of civil purity, but he could not recover his ground.

While McCain had once been a hero, that was in the military and not in the civil sphere, and it seemed long ago and faraway. The rise of Sarah Palin seemed for a time significantly to rectify this disbalance. Her iconic image of moose-hunting frontiers-woman emerged from the virgin land itself, from the primordial ooze of the old wild west. McCain may have first named 'Joe the Plumber,' but it was Palin who married herself to this folk figure in mythical time. But only weeks after its emergence, Palin Hero was done in by the binaries, battered by the mainstream media as corrupt, arrogant, deceitful, irrational, and stupid. The financial meltdown in mid-September was not determinate, but provided a setting for the binary dice to be rolled a final time. McCain's response to the crisis seemed motivated by cynical and strategic motives; he was depicted as impulsive, grand-standing, confused, and irrational. In this context of his negatively depicted antagonist, Obama emerged as a democratic protagonist, a hero who seemed effortlessly to embody civil discourse once again. He was depicted as calm and confident, as intelligent and lucid. So inserted into the heart of the civil sphere, this unlikely and once marginal candidate was voted into office by an overwhelming majority, and allowed to take power inside the state.

Some roads not taken

In the analysis presented here, I have focused on symbolic processes inside the civil sphere. But social systems are much more than the civil sphere. The civil sphere is surrounded, or bordered, by noncivil spheres: the economy, the state/military, religion, family, gender, sexuality, and other more primordial communities of various kinds, such as those of ethnicity and race. These noncivil spheres are vigorous social worlds of meaning and institution, and historically they have intruded upon, interpreted, and restricted the promises of the civil in fateful and often highly unjust ways. Every struggle for power inside the civil sphere faces the challenge of handling these boundary issues, and this consideration underscores the vital distinction between civil and public. Classical and modern normative theory emphasizes deliberation as the uniquely democratic character of public life. I would suggest, to the contrary, that nondemocratic issues and anti-civil considerations permeate the public sphere as well. If membership inside the civil sphere sustains democracy and amplifies citizenship,

public spheres are merely performative spaces, platforms for dramaturgy in which civil claims can be expanded but also revoked, in which antidemocratic claims are legitimated, and in which the boundaries of the civil sphere are often intertwined in dangerous and threatening ways. In my book-length work on the cultural pragmatics of the 2008 Presidential campaign, I will speak about these potentially dangerous boundary issues in terms of religion, gender, race, family, nation, region, and class. I will demonstrate how these considerations are brought into the public sphere and intertwined, or not, with the civil campaign.

The other important issue I will address in the book-length version of this study is what I call ‘the new reflexivity’ of democratic struggles for power. The old reflexivity points to the self-awareness that has, for at least two centuries, been a structural dimension of power struggles in democratic societies. There has always been some differentiation between the intra-civil sphere institutions – between communicative and regulative institutions – and even inside the communicative and regulative institutions themselves. This level of differentiation, internal and external, guarantees that, from the beginning of modern democratic civil spheres, there has been a high degree of self-reflexiveness, and institutional and value conflict. For example, the media watches out for its own interests against the interests of the law, against the campaigns of ambitious and crafty candidates, and against political parties. The candidates and their parties, in turn, are always cautious and often antagonistic to the media.

For example, *The New York Times* reports that ‘strategists for Obama ... have made it clear they have to control his image and protect against attack.’²⁵ This both annoys and worries the media, for they are aware that they are routinely being lied to, by both parties and candidates. In the face of such prevarication, they feel the need to point it out and also to produce ‘the truth’ as they see it from their professional-norm position. Otherwise, in their view, the people are being manipulated, and the process becomes antidemocratic. On the one hand, journalists wish to emphasize that Obama has a ‘stated desire to be unusually transparent and open’, to be civil towards the media rather than being manipulative and controlling. At the same time, *The New York Times* reports that Obama is, nonetheless, ‘at loggerheads with media organizations’ who want greater access to the candidate and his staff. But none of this is new. The media has always been reflexive about its relationships with political power.

By speaking about the ‘new’ reflexivity, I wish to refer to a growing self-consciousness, not about institutional differentiation, but about the culturally constructed nature of the struggle for political power itself. The older, standard reflexivity was about the ‘natural’ grounds of conflict and interest between institutions whose ‘realness’ was taken for granted. For example, in democratic countries there has been an enduring conflict between ‘free press’ and ‘fair trial.’ This has produced reams of reflexive discussion about the respective roles of law and media and how to mediate their boundaries. Nonetheless, in the public journalism reporting on these conflicts, both sides are naturalized, referred to as ‘essentialized’ entities with real interests rather than being deconstructed. Things are different today, when the sophisticated print, television, and web commentators speak about the need for new narratives and control of the image. News and events are no longer presented as if they happen naturally. The media cover the spinning of the thing as much as the thing in itself, though they are careful in the process not to deconstruct themselves: they admit neither to spinning nor to narrating the news. Their professional ethics are too deeply held for that.

While for at least two centuries, democratic and nondemocratic nations have sustained public spheres whose structuring has depended upon mass media, it has only been in postmodern societies that self-consciousness about the mass-mediated production of the political image has assumed central stage. Politics has always been symbolic and cultural, but only in postmodern societies has public political action become reconceptualized as political ‘performance.’ Those who struggle for power in democratic societies have always worked to project powerful symbolic images of themselves on the public stage, and to control their interpretation. Today, however, political journalism has become increasingly focused on evaluating this performative task. Political journalism is concerned as much with the intricacies of political performance as with political events, as much with the staging of political discourse as with political discourse itself. Intellectual critics and critical sociologists often decry the emphasis on ‘symbolic politics’ as manipulative and propagandistic, as a turning away from reality to pretence, simulation, and spectacle. Political practitioners speak simply about getting out truthful information about their message or their candidate. Political journalists tell us how the sausage is made.

Why is there this new reflexivity? It is not because politics has become deceptive and obsessed with spin where once it was guided by sincerity and concerned with truth. Neither is it because of the emergence of the ‘new journalism’ after Watergate or the rise of Reaganism. These may have been efficient causes, but they were not the fundamental ones. Politics has always been performative, but the elements of this performance have become more and more defused – there are new roles, new paid specialties, and a new self-consciousness about these contributions, a new awareness. For example, the earlier you go back in democratic mass politics, the less likely it is that you will find speech writers. Even as speech writing became more common, moreover, it did not become a specialized role, a ‘profession’. Even as speech writing became a firmly institutionalized role, it was not displayed on the public stage. Only in the last 30 years has ‘the speech writer’ become a common trope and familiar presence in democratic politics, a figure who steps out of his role to take credit for the candidate’s words (Lim 2008, pp. 78–86). Journalists rarely fail to address themselves to the question of whether the words coming out of the candidate’s mouth are actually his or her own words, and successful speech writers rarely fail to write books bragging about their own power – at the expense of the candidate’s – at some later time. Because of this defusion, it is ever so much harder for fusion – the appearance of naturalness – to be gained. What the media are covering is the *effort* at achieving fusion as much as the candidates’ conflict itself. Yet the possibility of achieving authenticity nonetheless remains. As in the theatre so in politics, there remains the ‘willing suspension of disbelief.’

The same movement from nonexistence to informal existence to hidden existence to publicly reflected upon existence applies to many other aspects of the struggle for power. Once, there were no press secretaries; today, there are many for each Presidency and campaign. Once, speeches were made without armies of spinners descending on journalists to mediate their interpretation; today, spinning, and the discussion of spinning, has become a publicly discussed craft. Once, campaign speeches were given with little advance warning other than an announcement the previous day. Today, there is a profession of ‘advance men’ who arrive days before and whose job is to create a crowd. Once, it was primarily his friends who advised a man of power. Today, he hires professional teams of veteran strategists, who themselves deploy other specialized teams, like pollsters, advertisers, media buyers, and public relations groups, not to

mention make-up artists, lighting specialists, and costumers. The mass-mediating dimensions of performance have also become defused. The blogger has emerged as a new social role. It performs both the factual and interpretive roles of journalism in a nonprofessional way. The blogger is not just a new kind of factual gatherer, but a new kind of interpreter, one that speaks openly and ideologically and personally even while supposedly on behalf of the people themselves.

Such performative defusion has made it much more difficult for those struggling for power to make their image seem natural and real. Journalists have become interested in explaining why. In the new reflexivity, media have become very explicit about the elements of political performance. Everywhere there is talk about narrative, performance, and spinning, about stagings and settings, about the variability of scripted speech writing, about *mise-en-scene*, and about the contingency of audience reception.

Conclusion

Contrary to democratic and sociological theory, the factual status of issues is, *per se*, relatively insignificant in the struggle for power. Issues are the present, the visible of power struggles. But what is really important is the absent. Academic campaign observers – along with the political scientists and sociologists who study power – tend to miss the invisible, not spoken symbolic language and speech that constitute the actual referents of power struggles in formally democratic societies. Journalists, bloggers, and voters themselves see campaigns as about personalities, issues, and ideologies, about being liberal or conservative, pro- or anti-abortion, military intervention, affirmative action, surveillance, gay marriage, immigration, free trade, unions, the minimum wage. In other words, they see campaigns as about real things that exist out in the world, either as values or interests, or actual people.

My argument has been that these are all signifieds. They are concrete issues and ideological positions that can, in fact, equally be constructed in either a positive or a negative way. Contests for power are not decided by ‘real’ things in themselves, but rather by aligning real things and ‘urgent’ things with what really makes meaning, the background systems of signifiers. It is the tensions between democratic and anti-democratic codes, and between the past and future of mythical narratives, that are the actual referents of political campaigns. They are the be-all and end-all of the struggle for power. Everything is done as if words and images matter. And they do. Difference reigns supreme.

Still, while a fundamental and necessary referent, the discourse of civil society is not determinate. There is the element of agency. Political actors and campaigns need to struggle for power. They are compelled to create performances, and their success is contingent. It depends on skill and fortune, on commanding an effective stage, on media interpretation, on audiences being prepared by shifting social conditions in certain felicitous ways.

To control the state in a democratic society means to become the chosen representative of the civil sphere. Normative theorists of democracy have understood this to mean that the choice is a deliberative one. Social scientists have understood this choosing to be a reflection of social and economic conditions. In this essay, I advance an alternative view. To become a representative of the civil sphere is less a matter of rational deliberation than of symbolic representation. Politicians must become collective representations, textured and tactile images that inspire devotion, stimulate communication, and trigger interaction. This is hardly a matter of ritual,

though the experience of highly affecting scenes of fusion is ardently sought. It is a matter of controlling the image. It is to become a hero, to work the binaries while watching the boundaries. Pollution and purity are the aim, but partisanship must be avoided at all costs. Politics is performance, but political image cannot be seen as constructed. The media's new reflexivity is everywhere a danger. It threatens to undermine authenticity. Artificiality may be an attribution, but it has the power to kill.

Notes

1. For background, see Alexander (2006a). In Alexander (2009), I bring this perspective to bear in contemporary issues in political sociology and to recent theories of power.
2. Haugaard (1998, pp. 167–168, original italics) has also connected performativity to power: 'Structural constraint works on the level of infelicity. When an actor *intends* to reproduce structures or meaning but other actors treat the intended meaning as infelicitous, there is a failure in structural reproduction ... If others are willing to grant the same meaning to an act of commanding as is intended by the speaker, then ... the command is reproduced. If, on the other hand, the act of commanding meets a response of infelicity then it is not a command ... Except for direct coercion, it is always the attitude of the second actor B who determines the success of an exercise of power ... The person extending power is always potentially open to infelicitous reactions which represent the structural limits of their power. On the other hand, by performing well or gaining trust, it is possible to redefine a position and, in so doing, create new power resources.'
3. Kovaleski, S., 2008. Obama's organizing years, guiding others and finding himself. *The New York Times*, 7 July, p. A1.
4. Nagourney, A. and Lebiovich, M., 2008. Clinton ends campaign with clear call to elect Obama. *The New York Times*, 8 June, p. A1.
5. Stelter, B. and Rutenberg, J., 2008. Obama's speech is a TV hit, with reviewers and commentators alike. *The New York Times*, 29 August, p. A14.
6. Powell, M., 2008. Barack Obama: calm in the swirl of history. *The New York Times*, 4 June, p. A1.
7. Broder, J.M., 2008. Obama, adopting economic theme, criticizes McCain. *The New York Times*, 10 June.
8. Quoted in William Kristol, 'A campaign we can believe in?' *The New York Times*, Section A, Op-Ed page.
9. Kristol, A campaign we can
10. Harwood, J., 2008. The caucus – democratic primary fight is like no other, ever. *The New York Times*, 2 June, Section A.
11. Kovaleski, 2008. Obama's organizing years
12. Ibid.
13. Rutenberg, J. and Zeleny, J., 2008. Obama's campaign tightens control of image and access. *The New York Times*, 19 June, p. A1.
14. Ibid.
15. Broder, 2008. Obama, adopting economic theme.
16. Rutenberg, J., 2008. Friendly campaigning, only not so much. *The New York Times*, 12 July, Section A.
17. These insights are developed by Yale sociology graduate student Inge Schmidt in her PhD dissertation.
18. Luo, M. and Zeleny, J., 2008. Obama, in shift, says he'll reject public financing. *The New York Times*, 20 June, Section A.
19. Rutenberg, 'Friendly campaigning, only not so much'.
20. Powell, M. 2008. Obama, awaiting a new title, carefully hones his partisan image. *The New York Times*, 3 June, A18.
21. Powell, M., 2008. For Obama, a pragmatist's shift toward the center. *The New York Times*, 27 June.
22. Harwood, J., 2008. Flip flops are looking like a hot summer trend. *The New York Times*, 23 June, Section A.

23. Powell, M. and Zeleny, J., 2008. Obama fuels pullout debate with remarks. *The New York Times*, 4 July.
24. Healy, P., 2008. Target: Barack Obama. Strategy: what day is it? *The New York Times*, 4 July.
25. Rutenberg and Zeleny, 'Obama Campaign keeps Close Watch on his Image.' *The New York Times*, 19 June, p. A1.

References

- Alexander, J.C., 2003. Modern, ante, post, and neo: how intellectuals explain 'Our Time'. In: J.C. Alexander, *The meanings of social life: a cultural sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 193–228.
- Alexander, J.C., 2006a. *The civil sphere*. New York: Oxford.
- Alexander, J.C., 2006b. Cultural pragmatics: social performance between ritual and strategy. In: J.C. Alexander, B. Giesen, and J. Mast, eds. *Social performance: symbolic action, cultural pragmatics, and ritual*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 29–90.
- Alexander, J.C. 2009. Power, politics, and the civil sphere. In: K.T. Leicht and J.C. Jenkins, eds. *Handbook of politics*. New York: Springer.
- Alexander, J.C. and Smith, P., 2003. The strong program in cultural sociology: elements of a structural hermeneutics. In: J.C. Alexander, ed. *The meanings of social life: a cultural sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 11–26.
- Austin, J.L., 1957. *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Durkheim, E., 1951 [1911]. *The elementary forms of religious life*. New York: Free Press.
- Haugaard, M., 1998. *The constitution of power: a theoretical analysis of power, knowledge and structure*. Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press.
- Kantorowicz, E.H., 1957. *The King's two bodies: a study of medieval political theology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lim, E.T., 2008. *The anti-intellectual presidency: the decline of presidential rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush*. New York: Oxford University Press.