

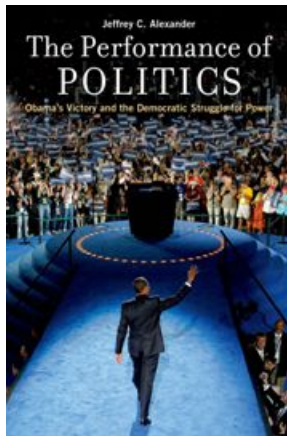
Why Politics is Theater



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Jeffrey Alexander, a sociology professor at Yale and co-director of its Center for Cultural Sociology, studies politics, but not with the usual metrics of polls, bills passed, and votes won. Instead, he focuses on “the cultural, the symbolic, the aesthetic, the rhetorical,” he said. “When you do this kind of work, and you talk about emotions and images, people often say that you can’t talk about the real hard stuff, like power.” In [The Performance of Politics: Obama’s Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power](#), Alexander explores how power comes in part from image and myth. Below, he chats with Zócalo about the powerful symbolism of Barack Obama, Sarah Palin, and the Tea Party, and why we shouldn’t despair over how closely politics resembles theater.

Q. *What made Obama’s image so captivating for the country in 2008?*



A. I think even though we live in a modern and pretty rationalized society that emphasizes material things, we also need heroes. In that sense, our society isn't much different from a medieval society. We need myth. We need heroes. A hero is somebody who communicates that he can save us. I think Obama presented a face and an image and words that said: I can save this country. I can help it through the crisis of the Bush years. I can overcome inequality. I can help Americans overcome the schisms and fragmentation of Hurricane Katrina and the wars, especially the Iraq war.

Obama also identified himself with the tradition of Martin Luther King, perhaps the most charismatic figure of the last half of the 20th century for Americans. He represented hope and the dream of bringing Americans together. And it's pretty clear that Obama put himself in that mold. He inspired a lot of people to think he could bring about the same kind of dramatic change, related to the utopian ideals of what America could be.

Q. *How are these symbols made, and how are they seen or changed by our fragmented media?*

A. The symbols are projected through television, websites, campaign literature. Campaigns should be seen as if they are production companies, making daily films, and more than once a day. They create projections and narratives just as producers of fiction do. There isn't a fine line today – and indeed there wasn't a fine line 100 years ago – between factual politics and fictional narrative.

Images exist in the ether of society. We have a world of myth and hopes and fantasies that we are vaguely conscious of. In a political campaign, the speechwriters and managers and the gifted candidates aim to crystallize these myths – to become what I call a collective representation of them, to embody them, so that the candidate can become larger than life.

Of course, the first challenge is, can you do it? John McCain was unable, really, to create this kind of heroic image – or at least one that fit with the times. He had the image of a military hero but not really a civic kind of hero. The Republicans brought in a man named Steve Schmidt in early July 2008 to take over the image-making for McCain's campaign. Schmidt is a brilliant image man, but even he couldn't fix the campaign.

The second challenge is anticipating how the images will be received. These images are, as you suggest, mediated through journalism, through the fragmentation of newspapers, the competing ideologies of the cable shows, the blogs. I think of these as interpreting critics, who are in between the campaign projection and the audience reception of images. It's a very difficult situation, because audiences need to think that the campaigners are authentic – that they're not images. There needs to be a sense of fusion between citizens and a candidate, so that they can say, "You're my guy," or "you're my gal." But the media keeps saying, "Hey, wait, this is all constructed, this is all artificial." They look backstage and point out that there are speechwriters and internal polling. It creates a tremendous problem for candidates.

Q. *You mentioned that McCain's campaign had an image problem. Was Sarah Palin intended as the solution?*

A. She was a kind of Hail Mary pass. The Republicans found themselves in a difficult position by the middle of August 2008. They realized that McCain wasn't connecting with the moderate center. He had painted himself into a corner with his years of seeking conservative support in order to win the nomination, which meant that the only segment of the audience he did connect with – and this rather weakly – was the Bush wing of the party. By his cultivation of the right, however, McCain lost his association with the maverick identity, the independent brand he had cultivated so successfully earlier in his career.

So, the GOP needed to have somebody who could be more powerfully engaging as a performer and who might represent more than the right wing.

Sarah Palin was a brilliant choice. She was presented very effectively for two weeks in early September as an independent-minded reformer in Alaska, as a kind of post-feminist, conservative, bear-hunting Annie Oakley type. She's a good example of a politician embodying myth. There is still in our country a western, frontier mythology. She seemed to embody that very effectively for a while.

Q. *Given that Palin was often attacked on her policy credentials but was so effective symbolically, what's the relationship between a candidate's actual policies, and his or her symbols?*



A. It's a good question. I think policies are always wrapped inside of symbolic representations. If you ask somebody whether they would support the policies of a conservative Republican they might say no, but if a Ronald Reagan comes along, who gives the impression of being a sympathetic and friendly rather than an ogre-like person, they might change their minds about the policy. My own feeling is that the issues usually don't change the course of political campaigns. Campaigns, and the fate of presidencies, are fought in the middle of the political spectrum, with at most 20 percent of the electorate. The two sides, on the left and the right, care about the issues. They're very ideologically committed. They don't care whether the candidate is a charmer or not. They're going to vote for him or her. So campaigns – not primary campaigns, which are of course very different – depend entirely on the people

in the middle, and they are responsive to performance and style not to issues.

To return to Palin, Americans were convinced that she was this feisty candidate. Then the journalists came in – they were upset at what they thought was their manipulation by the McCain campaign. They thought McCain was pulling something over on them because the spin about the nomination was so heavy but neither the press nor the public knew much about her. And it wasn't just liberal or centrist journalists, but right-leaning ones too, who traveled to Alaska and collectively “discovered” that in fact Palin had been misrepresenting herself. The campaign had

picked a woman who, while presenting herself to the national civil society as democratic and reformist, often seemed authoritarian, deceptive, nepotistic in her own milieu.

I would argue that there is a culture of democracy that defines how people need to act in order to be representatives of our society – they need to have the qualities of honesty, openness, rationality, and independence. The take on Palin became critical not because of her stance on abortion or small government. It became negative because of the impression that she hadn't been honest with the American people.

This is what American politics revolves around – the contrast between what I call “civil” and “uncivil” qualities and character. And then, of course, Palin was caught like a deer in the headlights in two long-delayed television interviews. This double whammy – of Palin as an uncivil deceptive person, and as dumb as a door nail – is a polluting symbolic construction that could well prevent her from being elected president.

Q. What happened to Obama's image when he took office?

A. There's an old saying: You campaign in poetry and govern in prose. When you assume power, you become an executive and an administrator. You have to commit yourself to policies, and the more radical those policies are, the more they challenge vested interests and produce anger and fear. The possibility of making everybody, or most people, feel good is reduced when you exercise power. That's certainly been the case for Obama.

I like to think of Obama as the last enlightenment man. When you read his books and listen to his speeches, you see that he doesn't believe in all this image and representation and narrative kind of stuff. He presents himself as a rational person guided by common sense who believes that people of goodwill can reach agreement. His entire career has been dedicated to getting Americans to get beyond the polarization of the 1960s and back into the vital center. That's been a key part of his appeal, and he really seems to believe in it. When he took office, I think what happened is he tried to carry out this post-partisan position. He tried to create progressive policies, but not radical ones. The proof of that is that he was always attacked from the left for being too moderate. He always positioned himself as reaching out his hand across the aisle, and claiming that we're a better society when we aren't so polarized and divided.

I think that, in this respect only, Barack Obama betrayed a certain naivety, a lack of intuitive feeling – a sure footing – for the national political game. In a sense, he gave Republicans veto power over his own symbolism. All they had to do was say he wasn't compromising to make it seem like he wasn't really a post-partisan person. If the Republicans didn't give him any support, then the voter has to conclude that Obama was wrong about the possibility of a vital center or, even worse, about his intention to recreate one. Working from this narrative, the Republicans bashed him around pretty good throughout the year-long healthcare struggle and he began to look very weak and ineffective, and even deceptive. He based the authority of his office and the success of his idealistic early years on the fact that he could create a postpartisan program. The Republicans led him along, but eventually said no, and they made him look the fool.

And because he is the last enlightenment figure, Obama thought that once he won office, he could stop the image-making and get down to the work of making new law and organization in a sober manner.

He seemed to believe the results would speak for themselves, that folks would see his reforms for what they were, and give him a high grade. So immediately from his inauguration speech on, he was so much more measured, and much less charismatic. He didn't tour the country giving rousing speeches. He withdrew to the Oval Office and made his legislative sausage. He was – there is no doubt – very effective at getting legislation passed, and he put into place a whole range of constructive, imaginative social programs dealing with inequality and financial regulation. But he lost touch with the “spirit” of the campaign. He put down the rhetorical tools skills that had made him such a successful candidate. It was a terrible mistake. And when he walked offstage, the Republicans, especially the grassroots like the Tea Party, they walked onstage and created a very powerful symbolism, creating performances reaching back to the core of America's collective identity.

Q. Was Obama able to effectively harness his symbolic power during the 2010 midterm elections?

A. He entered the stage far too late. Obama's advisors must have told him that the Democrats were going to be roundly defeated in the midterm elections. Without ever saying so, he tried to separate his image and his charisma from congressional Democrats. He was reluctant to publicly support most of the candidates who had gone on the line to support the programs he had championed. He had a different agenda than a congressional candidate – his agenda was to keep himself viable and look to 2012, which he regarded as watching out for longer term interests of the progressive side. The reason the Democrats lost is because Obama had failed to symbolize effectively for the first two years, because the Republicans had generated a tremendously powerful cultural counter-movement, and finally because the economy had gotten worse. As a heroic champion of civil repair, Obama had promised to save the economy and he hadn't been successful. There was a devastating challenge to his narrative line and the Congressional defeat brought down the curtain on Act I of his presidency.

Now we're in Act II. It's a new ball game. I am inclined to believe Obama will win the 2012 presidential campaign. I think we're going to see a more deft performance of the play “Obama in Power.” And it has already begun. The reason he's going to be successful in 2012 is that he is now, for the first time in the post-campaign period, drawing effective contrasts between himself and conservatives. Because the conservatives have actual power, they can be seen more as the real enemy of reform. They stand for particular policies, and Obama can define himself against these in a powerful way. In addition, Obama will be able to symbolically construct the vital center by drawing a difference between himself and the left. He was very reluctant to do that in Act I. The left continuously attacked him as weak, yet – because of his reluctance to polarize – he didn't respond. For both these reasons – because he can more easily pollute Republican policies and more forthrightly differentiated himself from the left – he'll be more successful at creating a progressive but moderate symbolic space that will reconnect him with the center of the political spectrum.

Q. *When most people describe politics as theater, they mean it cynically. Should we feel cynical about how much politics resembles theater?*

A. It's a great question. When people say that politics is performative, it's an insult, precisely because we want authenticity, honesty, and sincerity. But a very good performer is one who communicates authenticity. It's misguided, and even crippling, to think that politics can be anything other than theatrical. Each political side accuses the other of being theatrical and artificial, but what each ideology wants, in fact, is to find an authentic performer who can symbolically represent their ideals, their policy. Are we cynical about theater itself? Do we object – as the Puritans and Plato did – to art? No! Do we never give ourselves over to a great movie, a great painting, a great play? Yes, we do! Our lives are made meaningful by good books and television shows and movies and art. These fictions are not simply diversions: We deeply believe in the truth of these aesthetic representations. We have to understand that, when we acknowledge that politics is a theater, we can insist, at the same time, that politics is deeply concerned with moral truth. At the same time, insofar as we understand it as theater, we keep a bit of a distance from these truths, which allows us to be less dogmatic and more tolerant of the other truths of the other sides. This is not cynicism but value commitment – to meaning and rationality that is a less scientific and restrictive kind.

**Photo courtesy [The White House](#).*