Reframing Barack Obama’s Thick Philosophical Pragmatism: An Experiment in Democratic Redirection

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This article focuses on the relationship between Barack Obama and pragmatism by reframing Barack Obama’s deeply held values, carefully considered intellectual commitments, highly developed gifts, hypothetically framed transformative strategies, and their emerging outcomes in light of works by classical and contemporary philosophical pragmatists in order to help us clarify how we can advance pragmatism’s meaning and relevance in the twenty-first century.

Imagine the gifted child of an idealistic, activist intellectual, a doctoral student of John Dewey’s granddaughter, who raises him in the 1960’s on islands in the Pacific where some of his friends and their families struggle to live and find life good amidst poverty, post-colonial distortions of politics, culture, and economy, and globalization’s threats to their community-based lifeworlds. Imagine that mother’s anthropological training and practice as an engaged insider, a listener and observer who participates in Southeast Asian communities’ processes of framing their own problem-situations and the values that will matter to them in their necessary and unevadable transformation. Imagine her bringing this specific, local standpoint into the dynamic process of forming a larger body of culture-inclusive knowledge in her doctoral dissertation, studying the real impacts of past ideas, institutions, and policies on these communities. Imagine her professional field work and advocacy for these communities as a regional leader of the Ford Foundation, developing studies to advance understanding of their present situation and to project the feasibility and desirability of alternative interventions on their behalf within the power-laden national and international context of the times, including education, clinics, and microfinance ventures that could bring their traditional arts and handcrafts into world-wide markets. Imagine this mother teaching her empathy and her cosmopolitan democratic ideals to her son during their years in Indonesia, waking him at 4:00 a.m. every day to study history, literature, and the English language under her tutelage, so that he will have the knowledge, skills, and self-discipline to fulfill the
leadership call she hears for him as a mixed-race inheritor of those who struggled and sacrificed through the Civil Rights movement to change the world. His “Joshua generation” would enter. Imagine her letters to him from the field when they are separated for months at a time after she sends him home to Hawaii to be educated in American schools while living with her parents – letters he could keep and re-read in which she reported on her efforts to help actualize the human rights of people in other areas of the global struggle Martin Luther King, Jr. emphasized in his Nobel Peace Prize Address and his last writings – letters in which she lovingly challenged this gifted, troubled son to keep his eyes on the prize in preparing to contribute to in his own way during his own time on the world stage.

Whether this mother and her son read John Dewey’s writings or learned his pragmatist angle of vision from others, this mother clearly expressed it through her example of intelligent, engaged, ideal-guided living and collaborative inquiry as well as her efforts to stimulate her son’s interest in the world, to call forth his gifts, and to help him frame a unique individual identity through his own active engagement with its problems. His was a Deweyan democratic education illuminated by great pragmatist texts from the African American philosophical canon. It formed a man who thinks and lives as a thick, historicist, philosophical pragmatist well-acquainted with many other discourses, an experienced practitioner of pragmatist democratic transformative practice, a professional community organizer, and a President of the United States deeply loyal to the process of law, to the evolving body of reflective experience expressed in the United States Constitution, and to the general kind of market system its liberal jurist interpreters have argued it frames and protects. This is why reframing Barack Obama’s deeply held values, carefully considered intellectual commitments, highly developed gifts, hypothetically framed transformative strategies, and their emerging outcomes in light of works by classical and contemporary philosophical pragmatists may help us clarify how we can advance pragmatism’s meaning and relevance in the twenty-first century.

Thinking with Dewey, William James, W. E. B. Du Bois, and George Herbert Mead can help us to understand Barack Obama’s struggle for personal identity and vision throughout his high school and college years, and even through his years as a young community organizer on Chicago’s predominantly black, working class and poor South Side. James helps us to understand the human self as complex, not fully organizable, and expansive, i.e., not contained within or stopping at the boundaries of one’s skin, but reaching out into a larger social world in which one’s clothing, one’s home, one’s family, one’s friends, and one’s community are part of oneself, and one likewise participates with and within other selves. Du Bois took up and further developed James’s complex conception of the self to acknowledge the disruptive admixture of race as an unevadable element interjected by a history of colonial power relations, including forceful subjection and continuing terrorism, legal dehumanization, psychic oppression, material extraction, and social marginalization. Obama read