

## Review

# The relevance of Obama's victory to post-modern theory

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**The paper focused on the postmodern theory and its relevance to contemporary societies with America as a reference point. The argument here is that there is conceptual mutuality between postmodern theory and Obama's victory as the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States of America. In this paper, the authors argue logically in favour of postmodern theory, that we are now in a postmodern world where stereotype perceptions against colour and gender are no longer necessary. Rather what counts most is the content of the character of an individual. The author relied extensively on secondary data and focused group discussion.**

**Key words:** American, character, Obama postmodern, societies.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is not a focus on the history of African Americans; it is not about the history of civil rights movements in America, neither is it about the biography of Barack Hussein Obama, nor is it about the anticipated benefits of American presidential victory to Africa if any at all. Strictly speaking, it is not about American political system, which the authors cannot claim reasonable level of competence. If any of the aforementioned are treated here, they should be regarded as yeast to leaven the paper.

The paper is rather a focus on the postmodern theory and its relevance to contemporary societies with America as a reference point. The argument here is that there is conceptual mutuality between postmodern theory and Obama's victory as the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States of America. In this paper, the writer argues logically in favour of postmodern theory, that we are now in a post-modern world where stereotype perceptions against colour and gender are no longer necessary. Rather what counts most is the content of the character of an individual. The author relied extensively on secondary data and focused group discussion.

## BACKGROUND TO OBAMA'S VICTORY

As earlier enunciated the paper is not about Obama's biography. However, it will be a-historical to embark on a research of this nature without a cursory view on Obama's background and the factors that necessitated his victory.

### Early life

Barrack, meaning "blessed" in Arabic (National Standard November 17, 2008) was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on August 4, 1961 by eighteen year-old Ann Dunham of Wichita Kansas and Barrack Obama Snr. of Kenya (Mansfield, 2008). Both parents were students at the East-West Centre of the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Barrack Snr. happens to be the first African student at the University.

Three years later, 1964, Barrack's parents divorced; Ann married Lolo Soetoro and by 1967, Obama and his mother moved to Indonesia. 1971, he returned to Honolulu and enrolled in Punahou School. By 1979, he entered Occidental University in Los Angeles and later transferred to Columbia University in New York. By 1987, Obama entered Harvard Law School at the age of

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twenty-seven. This is very remarkable in his life as he became the First African-American President of the Harvard Law Review in 1990 (Obama, 2004). Within this period, he published two books – *Dreams from My Father* (1995) and *Audacity of Hope*, the best seller in 2006. On July 27, 2004, he made democratic convention speech which launched him to national prominence. Earlier he won the Illinois general election for the US Senate. On February 10, same year, he announced his candidacy for the presidency of the United States of America (Mansfield, 2008). No doubt, his background contributed to his victory as the President of America on November 4<sup>th</sup> 2008 (Tell, November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

Today, around the world, the young new president has become a symbol of what people think America should be. No doubt, Obama is talented. Because of his incredible character and intelligence, Nesbit described him as “a rock star” (Mansfield, 2008). Speeches are potent weapons for motivation, inspiration, challenges and self-actualization. Obama once remarked on how people slept when he was making a speech in a public gathering (Obama, 2004). But later he became a master in Orator and Sophistry. When he was elected Senator from Illinois, Obama had this comment to make.

“When I won a majority of the votes in the Democratic primary, winning in the white areas as well as black in the suburbs as well as Chicago, the reaction that followed echoed the response to my election to the Law Review. Mainstream commentators expressed surprise and genuine hope that my victory signaled a broader change in our racial politics, within the black community, there was a sense of pride regarding my accomplishment, a pride mingled with frustration that fifty years after *Brown V. Board of Education* and forty years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, we should still be celebrating the possibility (and only the possibility for I have a tough general election coming up) that might be the sole African American and only the third since reconstruction to serve in the Senate (Obama, 2004).

His speech here is similar to those of African Americans in the 1950's and 1960's which turbulent times in African American History were. Obama was just two years old when the Late Martin Luther King Jnr. made the world famous speech, “I have a Dream”. Almost half a century later, Obama broke the barriers and paved his way to the White House. Martin Luther in a prophetic manner remarked, “I have been to the mountain top, I have looked over and I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you”, (National Standard November 17, 2008; Anagwonye, 2008). This statement was made by Martin Luther King Jnr. on the night before he was assassinated.

King argued that America, had failed on her promise of equality, freedom and self-determination. According to him, “There will be neither rest nor tranquillity in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundation

of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges” (Anagwonye, 2008).

This statement was made at the climax of African Americans' struggle for self-determination. Obama believes that race relations in America have improved tremendously.

In the *Audacity of Hope* (2006), he “emphasized that he has witnessed a profound shift in race relations in his lifetime”. According to him, “I have felt it as surely as one feels a change in the temperature. When I hear some in black community deny those changes, I think it not only dishonours those who struggled on our behalf, but also robs us to our agency to complete the work they began. But as much as I insist that things have gotten better, I am mindful of this truth as well. Better is not good enough” (Obama, 2004).

Obama's strong faith in change, must have contributed in no small measure to his victory: He was optimistic that racial relations in America have improved, hence, the audacity to vie for the presidency. Obama is a man with extraordinary courage. Apart from this, there appear to be some elements of destiny, divine providence and fate. Just like Bill Clinton, who visited the White House as a student and after which began to dream towards becoming the president of America, Obama at 10 years old wrote in his elementary school graduating book in Indonesia that his ambition was to become the American president. But his Indonesia classmates laughed him to scorn, saying that he was merely living in a fantasy world (Newswatch, January 5, 2009).

Obama also visited the White House in 1984. He worked with a group of student leaders to see Reagan. His observation of the White House was expressed thus:

“I marveled not at the White House's elegant sweep, but rather at the fact that it was so exposed to the hustle and bustle of the city” (Obama, 2004).

Apart from destiny and or divine providence, Obama and his team worked hard for the victory. Circumstances in America also made it possible. In fact some analyst predicted correctly. John Zogby, a leading American pollster predicted victory for Obama (Tell, November 17, 2008).

The race was so tasking for the loser, John Mc-Cain to acknowledge in his speech “The American people have spoken and they have spoken clearly” (Tell, November 17, 2008). At the end of the election, it was obvious that he won not only in traditional democratic enclaves, but also in states considered to be confines of the Republican Party.

The ingredients for the victory were partly supplied by President George W. Bush, Mc-Cain and his political strategies. The financial crises, the strength of the democratic party and the political dexterity of the party's candidate; the controversy created by the post war crisis in Iraq, the declining poll rating of the incumbent; Mc-Cain

focused more on attacks rather than on issues. Americans were therefore in daring need of change.

Fortunately, Obama's campaign was predicated on change and hope. "The change we need and the change we believe in". The US, like the rest of the world, needs change, and this formed an anchor on which Obama hope cursor hangs.

In addition, Obama's movement was spearheaded by the fastest growing generation of US electorate (millennia generation) of ages 18 – 29 years. They carry no baggage of fear, doubt and prejudices of their parents and those before them. They are better educated, more exposed and they know the world better than their fore bears.

The democrats have never had it so good at the polls since the election of Bill Clinton in 1992. Obama got 43% of white votes (better than what John Kerry or Al Gore got against their Republican opportunity, 95% of African American votes, and 66% of Latin American votes. On the whole, he had 56% as against Mc-Cain 43% (National Standard November 17, 2008).

## POST-MODERNISM

The central focus of this paper is on the relevance of postmodern theory to Obama's victory. A theory could be seen as a formal set of ideas that is intended to explain why something happens or exists. Put differently, it is a model of explanation, a perspective or approach to issues (Chuku, 2007).

In social science, particularly in sociology there are many theories used to explain social phenomena. Among them, include: functionalism, Marxist conflict theory, social action theory, exchange theory, interactionalist perspective (interactionalism) just to mention a few. At the level of paradigm, some of them operate under the same umbrella. This is so because; theories are only parts of larger paradigms.

A paradigm is a fundamental image of the subject-matter within a science. It serves to define what should be studied, what questions should be asked, how they should be asked, and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers obtained (Ritzer, 1975).

In other words, a paradigm is the broadest unit of consensus within a science and serves to differentiate one scientific community (or sub-community) from another. It subsumes, defines and interrelates the examples – theories, and methods and instruments that exist within it.

To Kuhn (who originated the idea of paradigm in social sciences), a successful new paradigm must both offer a new way of looking at the world and leave open many questions to be answered by those who were later to become attracted to working on the paradigm (Kuhn, 1962, 1970).

In the early period of sociology and other social sciences,

functionalism and or positivism remained a major dominant ideology. In view of the hitherto existing social theories in social sciences, and the subject-matter of this paper, post modernism could be regarded as a shift in paradigm in all respects.

The sociological investigations of the founding fathers of sociology marked the beginning of modernism. They were particularly interested in the changes in the society, hence sought to provide explanations. Their explanations were scientific; they differ greatly from the old traditional way of explanations which were mythical and metaphysical. There are social scientists who think that the ideas of these founding fathers are sacrosanct and therefore a continuum. To them, the efficacy of their theories in contemporary society is not subject to further debates (Chuku, 2007).

These scholars believe that we continue to live in a society that can still be best described as modern and that we can therefore theorize in much the same way as these founding fathers did in the past. Exponents of this view (modernity theory) include; Jurgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens. On the other hand, is a group of scholars; Jean Baudrillard, Jean Francois Lyolard, Fredric Jameson and Arthur Kroker. They contend that, society has changed so drastically, that we now live in a qualitatively different, post modern society. Furthermore, they argue that this new society needs to be thought about in new and different ways (Chuku, 2007).

The central theme in modernity is that life, world and system are far more similar to the grand narratives of the classical theories of modernity than they are at variance with them. For post-modernists, the post-modern is a new historical epoch that is supposed to have succeeded the modern era, or modernity. The post modernists tend to reject the theoretical perspectives out-lined previously and as well as the ways in which the thinkers involved constructed their theories. George, (2000) emphasized that in their view the postmodern society is dominated by implosive, fattening, reproductive technologies, television, etc.

Schaefer, (2003) saw a post-modern society as a technologically sophisticated society that is pre-occupied with consumer goods and media images on such a large scale. It is a service driven society. A high info society. Post-modern theorists take a global perspective and note the ways that aspects of culture cross national boundaries. For instance, residents of the United States may listen to reggae music from Jamaica, eat sushi and other types of Japanese food and wear clog from Sweden. In Nigeria, fast food an idea from the west is fast becoming a way of life. Post modernists' theory tend to support a global or monoculture. They are not in support of traditional stereotypes of race superiority or supremacy. They are not in favour of traditional values of male dominance, but they are favourable to gender parity (Schaefer, 2006). Obama's victory is a vindication of postmodernism. We are in a new world; the world has

changed so drastically; let us begin to reconstruct social realities.

The relevance of any theory is in its application to life situation. A theory should lead to praxis. This is because; there is nothing as practical as a sound and articulate theory. However, it is often argued that there is a sharp distinction between theory and practice. The study often take for granted most of the scientific and technological breakthroughs in modern society without taking cognizance of the fact that most of these discoveries and inventive, first existed in the mental realm before they were actualized practically.

It is the ability to control activities through consciousness that distinguishes people from animals. Marx is perfectly explicit on this point: A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to share many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process, we get a result that already existed in imagination of the labourer at its commencement (Ritzer, 2000). To Marx, at the most abstract level, consciousness and its ability to direct activity were the distinctive characteristics of human beings, at least potentially. Of course, in putting theory to practice, we are bound to have some varieties. As a result of this argument, between practices and theories, it follows that political forms are never perfect. In other words, and in terms of the subject matter of this paper, it is posted that existentially; there is neither a pure democratic polity nor purity in theorizing.

No doubt, political forms overlap and interweave. However, one is theoretically or practically democratic or dictatorial as the case may be. Obama's victory is an exemplification of the purity of American's democracy and also a vindication of post-modernist theory of a non-racial, non-gendered biased world.

## **THE RELEVANCE OF OBAMA'S VICTORY TO POST-MODERN THEORY**

In the previous segment of this paper, we examine post-modern theory in relation to its efficacy in contemporary society. It was also logically established that there is conceptual mutuality between Obama's victory and the central theme of postmodern theory. Post-modernism is of the assumption that, the contemporary society has changed so dramatically that, we now require a new model of explanation to construct social realities. Strictly speaking, the emphasis of post modernism is on change which has occurred in all aspects of human endeavour including racial relations. Obama's campaign (slogan) was also predicated on change and hope. Obama's in his campaign emphasized that his government would make sure that every child in America had a decent slot of life,

and that the doors of opportunities remained open to all. This assertion is in consonance with American Declaration of Independence:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (Obama, 2008).

This statement of Declaration was only feasible for the whites; as for the blacks and other coloured people, it was not applicable. Obama was so passionate about this declaration. He believes that each of us arrives with a bundle of rights that cannot be taken away by any person or state without just cause, that through our own agency we can and must make of our lives what we will. It is a principle that is well understood by Americans and it orients their behaviours. They have it demonstrated by voting for Obama. Thus the United States will start its next political season with a remarkable event. On January 20, 2009 a country that within living memory, denied some black citizens the right to vote inaugurated its first black president.

Barrack Obama's inauguration will do much to improve two things that desperately need improving – America's reputation abroad and its mood at home. The Bush era had produced a dramatic decline in America's global image, with anti-Americanism taking root around the world, from European capitals to the Arab street (The Economist December, 2008).

His inauguration will also mark the culmination of the civil-rights revolutions which climaxed in the 1960's with the activities of Martin Luther King Jnr. and others. Obama's victory has pulled down the walls of racial prejudice and divide. In fact, the entire human race is uplifted by virtue of this victory. His ascendance will help to rebuild America's relations with the rest of the world, perhaps particularly with the Arab world. It will be hard for Muslims to accuse America of prejudice when its president is a man whose first name means, “Blessed” in Arabic and whose middle name is Hussien. And it will be hard for Europeans to accuse America of being a land of yahoos when its president is the highly educated author of two excellent books – “Audacity of Hope and Dream from My Father “. People in Indonesia – Asia would perceive him as their own and Africa of course sees him as an Africa with American orientation. All these notwithstanding, the president has so many problems to contend with, namely; fulfilling his electoral promises, the pressure from his party, middle East question, economic melt-down/depression, pull out from Iraq and Afghanistan, etc.

Obama had the courage to face all these challenges. Thus, at the congregation of more than 200,000 people in Chicago, American largest district part, Obama told the audience who listened with rapt attention that, “at this defining moment, change has come to America”... This

victory is not the change we seek – it is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back.”

## CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBLE LESSONS FOR NIGERIA

The central theme of this paper was on the relevance of Obama's victory to postmodern theory. Post modernism emphasis on change. Change which will not recognize colour, gender or age differences. The assumption made by post modernists is that the social world has changed so dramatically and drastically that we now live in an entirely new world, different from the grand narratives of founders of social sciences. This difference pre-supposes different approaches to the construction of social realities.

American Democracy as reflected by Obama's victory is an indication of the practicability of post-modern theory. With his election, America has shown that they have risen above racial prejudice and traditional party sentiments.

What lessons can Nigeria derive from America election/democracy remains a vexed question that needs to be answered by the Nigerian political class and the electorates. There are possible lessons to be learnt, first, it was not strictly based on ethic consideration, or colour; it was not attached with ethnic/religious consideration, election results were released within 24 h; no violence, arson or thuggery, no money bag politics. People placed the interest of their nation above that of race, party sentiment; personal gains, etc.; the electorate had their right respected, their votes were counted, no undue influence; the political party in power did not use state apparatus to remain in power; those who lost the elections willingly accepted the verdicts; losers were also considered, etc.

These are areas of possible lessons for Nigeria. We should not concentrate on our weakness such as lack of capital to pursue advanced democracy like America; high level of illiteracy, power failure, lack of modern electoral machines; etc. There is every possibility that Nigeria can be a shining example of democracy in Africa. The practice of option A<sub>4</sub> during the two party system of military government could be seen as an experimental period. Comparatively, Nigerian democracy could be described as nascent, but with lessons from other advanced democracies, Nigeria can surely practice democracy.

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