

## **The Obamas: Intersectional Interventions, Transnational Tryouts**

Johnny Van Hove

**Abstract:**

This timely volume emerged out of the conference "Obama and the Paradigm Shift", organized in the summer of 2011 at the University of Giessen, and offers 10 essays that ask if and to what extent Barack and Michelle Obama caused a paradigm shift in the U.S. and Germany in terms of gender, race, and political divisiveness. Despite not always being consistent, especially not in terms of its self-declared transcultural approach, this collection of essays offers lively, differentiated, multifaceted, and critical readings of the presidency of the Obamas. As such, it provides enrichment for the current, deeply polarized book market on the Obamas.

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## The Obamas: Intersectional Interventions, Transnational Tryouts

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Christ, Birte; Olson, Greta (eds.): *Obama and the Paradigm Shift: Measuring Change*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012 (American Studies – a Monograph Series 225). 298 pp. + List of Contributors, hardcover, €42. IBN: 978-3825360696

The editors of this volume, Birte Christ and Greta Olson, present a timely collection of essays that ask if and to what extent the presence and politics of Barack and Michelle Obama in the White House represented a paradigmatic shift in the U.S. and German "political and cultural landscape" (p. 12), particularly in terms of "race, gender, and political division" (p. 22). The book emerged out of the conference "Obama and the Paradigm Shift: The Measure of Change in the U.S. and Germany", organized in the summer 2011 at the University of Giessen. In the same vein as the presentations held there, this collection promises to adopt a "decidedly transnational perspective" (p. 12), as well as an intersectional approach. While not always consistent in terms of the quality of its organization, approach, and arguments, *Obama and the Paradigm Shift* generally offers a varied, multifaceted, and much-needed differentiated reading on the last four years of the Obamas by German and American scholars from (African) American Studies, Sociology, Literature, and Cultural Studies.

*Obama and the Paradigm Shift* comprises ten essays which are, unfortunately, published without subheadings or intuitively comprehensible order. In terms of reader-friendliness, organizing the essays around the panel titles of the conference in 2011 would have been a considerable navigational gain, although the informative introduction by Greta Olson and the thoughtful conclusion by Allyson Hobbs certainly add to the structural clarity of the collection. At least three essays offer convincing intersectional readings of what the conference titled "Gender Roles and the Obamas". Both Michaela Hampf and Birte Christ focus on Michelle Obama in their respective essays. Hampf argues that the first African American First Lady has effected a cultural paradigm shift in the U.S. by re-fashioning herself as a "mom-in-chief" (p. 72), thereby re-appropriating racist attributions made to African American women in general, and to Michelle Obama specifically, such as the stereotype of the militant 'Sapphire', as well as the over- or undersexed 'Jezebel' and 'mammy'. Birte Christ's gripping analysis of German media representations of Michelle Obama, in turn, can not observe any paradigm shift, neither in the usual tone of superiority of German media in their representations of U.S. politics, nor in their treatment of powerful women: by framing Michelle Obama as a role model of "post-feminist power femininity", she is used in German media "to cement gender relations rather than to initiate a shift in gender politics" (p. 190). Greta Olson focuses on Barack

Obama's thin, fit, and cosmopolitan body, which, as the author maintains somewhat hypothetically, "may subvert the dominance of thug masculinity" (p. 118), leading to the renegotiation of intersections of class, gender, and racial politics – in the U.S., that is, but not in German politics, as Olson exemplifies by means of the self-declared German Obama, Joachim Gauck.

The second thematic cluster revolves around what the conference dubbed "Race and Racial Politics". Thomas C. Holt asks whether Obama's election changed the ways in which Americans think about race. In light of recent African American history, from the 1870s via the 1960s to the current excessive incarceration rates of black Americans, Holt concludes that although there is a very different feel in the U.S. after Obama's election (p. 50), the current racial opening "will close if the broader changes in the structures of opportunity in American life are not realized, or, at least, if serious efforts are not made to realize them" (p. 51). Gabriele Dietze, who takes us back to the 2008 Democratic nomination race, suggests that the battle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama was yet another re-enactment of how race trumps gender (p. 89), due to the greater meaning that is given to racism in American life (p. 96).

The third thematic group of essays zooms in on the issue of what the conference called "Political Division and Inclusiveness", or whether Barack Obama succeeded in abating the divisiveness in the U.S. Andreas Falke investigates Barack Obama's promise to transcend polarization between Republicans and Democrats via a series of statistics. He highlights the idea that the current President, by aligning himself systematically with the Democratic majorities in both Houses, drove his opponents even more to extreme positions, thus widening the partisan divide, instead of closing it, and enabling Obama to claim the centre of the political spectrum for himself (p. 163), a strategy that might win him his re-election. Sabine Sielke, in contrast, emphasizes that Obama's "poetics of presidency" took the rhetoric of race, ethnicity, and religion in a direction that aims at "treading common ground, instead of highlighting division and difference" (p. 270). While Obama's appeal to ethnic minorities did transform "our sense of the US American mainstream" (p. 280), Sielke also points at the apparent irony that the minority communities that voted Obama into office are now most affected by the policies of return immigration by deportation. Michael Butter tackles the increasing anti-Obama polarization among the Republican base via the 'birther' conspiracy theory, which attempts to undermine the President's legitimacy by questioning Barack Obama's status as a natural born American citizen. Butter suspects that this theory might constitute a potential paradigm shift in the legitimacy of conspiracy theories in political discourse in general. Jörn Ahrens stresses that Obama feeds itself off "the substitution of reason and political argument with an excessive appeal to sentiment" (p. 259), thereby "personif[ying] a politics of post-democracy" (p. 251). Finally, Helen Bond focuses on the positive impact Barack Obama has had on children in the United States, Sierra Leone, China, Russia, and Jamaica, by showing how his election provided them with a sense of empowerment, protection, and a role model.

Rather than a central approach, the "decidedly transnational perspective" announced in the introduction seems, at times, more of an add-on, and an afterthought, to many essays. Apart from Bond, Christ, and Olson, most essays reduce their geographical scope to the U.S., with

the occasional wink to Germany or England. In various essays, Olson's in particular, general claims about "American culture politics" (p. 106) are made by drawing liberally from American or German news media sources. The question should be asked what these essays are more indicative of in the end: the news media of a given country or the latter's culture as a whole? In addition, despite the ambitious and laudable time frame needed to get the collection published before the showdown between Obama and Mitt Romney in November of this year, the content of a number of essays would have gained substance from a more thorough and critical editing. Jörn Ahrens' essay, for instance, could have backed up various claims more successfully with more detailed close readings. Some of his statements, as they stand now, sound overstated, most noticeably perhaps in the taken-for-granted analogies between Barack Obama's rhetoric and that of the fictional black president in the television series 24, David Palmer.

Nonetheless, this collection of essays offers enrichment of, and a spot-on commentary about, the 2012 book market on Obama, which so far mostly includes partisan pamphlets, as well as German reactions to the latter, such as *The Obama Hate Machine* (by Bill Press, New York 2012) and *Was ist mit den Amis los?: Warum sie an Barack Obama hassen, was wir lieben* (by Christoph von Marshall, Freiburg 2012). The present volume, in contrast, provides a lively and critical insight into the presidency of the Obamas and is recommendable for all those with an academic background and the intellectual willingness to dig beneath the surface of the Obamas.