

MARIUS JUCAN

THE CULTURAL DISSENSIONS OF THE PROMISED FUTURE: CULTURE
WARS AND BARACK OBAMA'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Marius Jucan

Babes-Bolyai University, International Relations and American Studies Department,
Deputy Dean Faculty of European Studies, Cluj, Romania.
Email: marjucan@yahoo.com

Abstract: The article presents an interpretive view on culture wars in America along with their echoes in the autobiographical works written by Barack Obama. Being either viewed as the manifestation of the “post-American” creed, looked down at as a mere product of popular culture, or being ignored as a marginal manifestation, culture wars flared before and after the presidential campaign of 2008, signaling the intensity of a yet unconsumed ideological combustion fuelling further cultural and political dissensions. One of the conspicuous consequences of culture wars in America is that the definition of culture has been significantly altered and that nowadays culture warriors have outnumbered intellectuals. Another outcome of culture wars is that they are considered by many as a benchmark of democracy and democratization, when more probably they are the product of an ideological confrontation. Thirdly, culture wars are regarded either as a political stylization of politicization of culture setting up a new network of correspondences between culture and politics. A final relevant consequence may be found in the increasing awareness that civil society and political parties may deploy different strategies to convey democratic ideals into reality, but it remains to be clarified if this should be carried out into the trenches of a pugnacious media and from there into the beliefs and expectations of citizens. Civil society and political parties in America construed differently the meanings of democracy, providing with different images the promised future and the American creed. Therefore, while culture wars spread their belligerency in various sectors of the American society, it is harder and harder to figure out a democratic consensus.

Key Words: culture wars, culture, politics, religion, autobiography, Barack Obama

The autobiographical writings of the president Barack Obama bear the dent of culture wars, without the author's explicit intention to mirror them. The two autobiographies did not have as a goal the objective of supporting and/or expanding the problematic of culture wars, or on the contrary the aim to extinguish the fiery substance of the ideological and cultural contention. Yet, both in *Dreams from My Father* and in *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama did not avoid to pinpoint exactly in what part of the political stage his loyalties stood, as well as where the foundations of his political thought were to be sought for. Moreover, a statesman of his caliber could not turn a blind eye to the cultural and political context of his country, especially when as a community organizer and former senator, the present day president of the United States has too often had the opportunity to contemplate, criticize but seldom mend the divisions of the American society. One still remembers that in running for the Democratic denomination for the presidential race, and even in the final hours of the competition with the candidate of the Republican party, Barack Obama was not a usual candidate, not only because he was the first African American running in a presidential race, but also because he was hailed as the factor of change in a divided America. I shall not insist therefore on the inner expectations of the Americans or on the international reactions before and after the election of a first African American president. Instead, I shall underline what Barack Obama repeatedly said, namely, that he regarded himself as a cultural offspring of the 1960s.

It is the reason why dealing with *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* one will encounter under various appearances the symbolic capital of the 1960s in two intertwining spheres which border on the issues of culture wars, race and religion. As a senator, a presidential candidate and then a president, Barack Obama has had the tactful attitude of an experienced political negotiator not to claim that his views were the views of all Americans. At the same time, he undertook the liberty of arguing and militating for this political and social program with the help of which he had won the votes of the majority of the Americans. He often relied on the fact that it was due to this program that the United States reinstated their democratic position at home and in the world, a process which was greeted by the majority of the world states with a few significant exceptions. Barack Obama's electoral victory of 2008 meant the recognition of America's passion (in the Tocquevillian sense of the word) for future and reform. Rereading at the beginning of the second mandate of the president Barack Obama *Dreams of My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, one might realize that the passing of time since the publication of the two works has brought them into a calmer and more contextual examination. Not surprisingly at all, *Dreams of My Father* has preserved its freshness and ingenuity because of the prevalence of literary elements, whereas *The Audacity of Hope* may look less exceptional in its content due

to its too didactic, expository structure, and also to its clear electoral campaign orientated aim. Both writings are extremely relevant to perceive the contentious issues of the promised future in America at the start of a new millennium, before the economic crisis had left an undeniable mark on the country and its citizens like. An unexpected adversary, the economic crisis has reversed many of the appealing political priorities and generally stalled the enthusiasm for reform of the new American leadership.

Paraphrasing the famous phrase of the right “to pursue happiness”, one may say that the “right” to foresee a future for America is determined by the quality of democracy and of the democratic citizens. In this respect Barack Obama’s autobiographies underscore the making of an American leader, observing the traditions of republicanism and democracy, but including as well different visions on the American creed, representing the interaction of different cultural inheritances. The entirety of the American dream depends therefore on the integrity of democracy and the latter one cannot be placed outside cultural traditions. Following the centrality of the trope of nature in Tocqueville’s account of democratic America as a future civilization, one could see that today instead of the nineteenth concept of nature which endowed Americans with the exceptional quality to be born free and equal, the future of democracy stands today to Americans and not only to them, as the cornerstone value which must be saved from embattled interpretations which eventually relativized the ideals of democracy. Culture wars rendered and interpreted in a violent vocabulary the uncertainties of the democratic future, blurring political accountability, claiming that there could not be a way out beyond political partisanship. The “reclaiming” of the American dream, to use Barack Obama’s words, calls for the unity of a symbol whose cohesion has been for a long time under the fire of antagonistic interpretations. In the following I shall attempt to examine some of the motifs of Barack Obama autobiographies in the light of culture wars, since it has been proved that the understanding of democracy and democratization taken apart from cultural traditions is but a formal and crude one.

In one of the most edifying definitions of autobiography, Phillipe Lejeune claimed that autobiography is a “pact” resulting from the coalescing three elements, author, narrator and character.¹ Regarding the huge variations of the genre of autobiography which developed over a great span of time in various cultures and literatures, Lejeune said that the reader may question or even doubt the similarity of the character in the autobiography with the one in reality, but he cannot deny its identity.² According to this, it is worthwhile noticing on the different manners in which Barack Obama created his autobiographical voice and character in *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, pursuing the aim of building the image of a new, persuasive and reliable young American

public personality. At a first glance, comparing the two above mentioned autobiographies, it is evident that the author wanted to encompass his “whole” past life in two distinct periods of time and also writing modalities. From this point of view the two works are clearly different. Yet, the common substance of the autobiographies links the two characters of the autobiographies as two alter-egos of the same real personality, providing a historic and also an imaginary background to their protagonist, Barack Obama, providing the reader with a sense of understanding of his becoming a public person. In this regard, Barack Obama acknowledged not only his craft in the actual writing of an autobiographical “story”, but also his knowing of how to use the illusion of time in organizing the chronological order in his autobiographies.

In *Dreams from My Father*, the childhood and the youth of the main character are selectively rendered, striking the reader with a great amount of biographical material disposed in a network of details, places and subjective impressions as well as moral and psychological judgments. All these elements are well knit in an originally planned scale of time, presenting the coming of age of the future Barack Obama and allowing the reader to connect the real person’s present with his revealed past. In this respect, *Dreams from My Father* illustrates Lejeune’s understanding of the autobiography seen as a “retrospective narration, in which the author accentuates the development of a personality.”³ Whereas the first autobiographical work clearly shows literary qualities, resembling from a literary point of view with a short “bildungsroman”, the second one contains mostly the opinions and the “deeds” of an American senator setting out on his ambitious and clearly determined journey to higher public achievements. *The Audacity of Hope* resembles from the perspective of the scale of time to a personal diary, emphasizing the occurrences of an American politician facing the issues of democracy in various areas, as shown in the titles of chapters of the book. The author insists that readers should mark the connection between reality and ideality, between the American “dream” and “hope”, two symbols by which Obama intended to awaken Americans from political disinterestedness and animate their spiritedness for a necessary change of the country’s course to more democracy. In the same characterization, both autobiographies deal with what Lejeune called “the illusion of eternity” in which reality is rendered as building the self-portrait of the main narrator”⁴ by an African American who succeeded in embodying the virtues of the American democrat.

From another point of view, Phillip Dodd underscored that autobiography is concerned as a genre with a fictional representation of reality no matter how close it approaches the surface of reality, because it is not “a simple transcription of an antecedent reality”⁵ Dodd stressed the relevance of the ideological context in studying any autobiographical work, adding that the rendering of the autobiographical character is

intentional in modern times. He implied that modern autobiography did not follow any longer the tradition of St. Augustine, Rousseau or Franklin, according to which the goal of the autobiographical writing was the mirroring of truth, as in the light of God, romantic soul, or personal success.⁶ Dodd viewed the autobiographical genre nowadays as being related to the consumer's sensibility, an important detail in order to perceive the relationship between the writer and the reader of an autobiography.⁷

Not only forms of the autobiography varied in time, but also the author's intentions concerning the aims of his work. Jean Paul Sartre, for instance, let the public know in his autobiography that his life was divided between "reading" and "writing". Sartre acknowledged that the reason for his autobiographical intention was the fact that "one writes for one's neighbors or for God. I decided to write for God, with the purpose of saving my neighbors".⁸ Which seemed to be perfectly understandable for the life of a philosopher, probably also for the mind of any autobiographical character who believes in persuasive presentation of a "life", actually the conflation of true facts with fiction. Sartre intuited the aim of the autobiographical character when writing: "Modest and insufferable, I saw my defeats as conditions for my posthumous victory".⁹ Any modern autobiographer, (Barack Obama included) regards his autobiography not only as a mere recollection saved from the past, but also as the past built in the mind of an author, an authored past, so to say. Boris Pasternak claimed that writer and reader cooperate in an autobiographical work, because the reader likes the stories and horrors of the history, regards history as an unending tale, and generally it is difficult to assess that the reader expects a "reasonable end" for the story.¹⁰ Bertrand Russell defined the aim autobiography as coinciding with the goals of his life, namely passion for love, knowing and the compassion for the sufferings of humanity.¹¹ Angela Davies stressed that her autobiography was not aimed to turn her real life into a representation of exceptional events, but to account in a personal response for those "forces" which determined her to become a communist and a civil rights activist.¹²

The popularity of the autobiographical genre in twentieth century African-American culture was underscored as being a cultural and ideological achievement accounting for the modernizing and recognition of pluralism in culture. It has been often underlined that black autobiographical genre differs in many respects from the white one¹³, due to the fact that generally, within the story told by a black narrator, the individual is regarded as part of a community, in whose name of whom the story is presented and legitimized as being "true". This constitutes an important ground in the widespread diffusion of the genre, articulating the autobiographical voice with the assertion of hope for a better future in communities emerging from poverty, backwardness, or from the silence of

subordination imposed by foreign domination.¹⁴ Black autobiography has been consistently and currently preoccupied with the question of “blackness” in various parts of the world, but firstly in the United States according to the tradition established by Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois. Later on, writers such as Chinua Achebe, essayists and intellectuals as Henry Louis Gates Jr., Kwame Anthony Appiah, etc., followed the examples set by Aime Cesaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor Richard Wright or James Baldwin. For these writers, but also for other black autobiographers including Barack Obama, the multiple cultural identity of the black narrator appeared as common trait, a consequence of the history of a great part of blackness.¹⁵ The African-American autobiography accentuated in the already mentioned tradition of Douglass and Du Bois the double identity of the American black and the cultural and political issues deriving from this, putting into light the relations of the black individual with the community, unmasking the racial ethos of the period.¹⁶

The 1960 publication of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* brought to the black public the relevance of the autobiography as a civil, racial and ideologically radical account of one’s life.¹⁷ The same tumultuous 1960s were the time for the political shaping of black intellectuals and the emergence of the black cultural discourse.¹⁸ Since then the autobiographical genre has underwent a radical alteration and the larger and larger involvement of black (and not only) writers and intellectuals in the rewriting of the literary and cultural canon of the United States was an undeniable cultural progress of the postwar American period. At the same time, African-American autobiography and journalism came to be seen together, as the two leading figures of black autobiography, Douglass and Du Bois had been famous journalists. Examining the connections existing among autobiography, journalism and the newsrooms, Calvin L. Hall observed a course of changes as far as blackness and Americanness were concerned in post-civil rights era in the examples of black journalists such as Jake Lamar, Nathan McCall, Patricia Rybon.¹⁹ Hall wrote about a “synergy” existing among race, class, gender and profession in African American autobiographies.²⁰ Hall considered their autobiographies as a manifest “dealing with the possibility of breaking free from marginalization”.²¹ Coinciding from this perspective with the question of the link between individual and community, a traditional theme in black autobiography as already shown, Hall accentuated that the autobiographical work deals however with the “story” of a person, whose role goes far beyond his/her own immediate interest.²²

Speaking of blackness, a leading African-American intellectual, Henry Louis Gates Jr. thought that race shows an irreducible difference among cultures, one cannot pretend to ignore or attempt to diminish its import in the continuous flux of economic globalization.²³ A renowned professor and publicist, Gates Jr. accentuated the changes occurred in the structure of the American literary canon, momentous transformations doing away

with the “invisibility” of the African American citizens. Heightening the importance of black autobiographies, Gates Jr. referred to the outstanding part of personal histories in ascertaining the reconstruction of the black past, salvaging it from oblivion or from misrepresentations.²⁴ „Blackness is a social category” wrote Gates Jr., elaborating on the social inequalities which accompanied and actually compelled for almost two centuries the perception of the black race in the United States as a personification of marginality.²⁵ Gates Jr. said that black autobiographical narratives should be inscribed in what he calls “larger narrative of ascent”.²⁶ Starting from the Emersonian phrase of ‘representative men’, one could borrow this sense of representation and lend it to the attempt of the before mentioned autobiographies to embody otherness in American white culture. Referring to Frederick Douglass, Gates Jr. noted that it was obvious that the greatest difficulty for the black man in the age of slavery and segregation was the “burden of representation”.²⁷ Being racial different to the majority, African Americans strove hard to acquire the same quality of “representative men” in the sense of embodying virtue and honor as the white people, of generally, human authenticity.²⁸

Cornel West regarded racial issues in present day America in unequivocal terms, thinking that African Americans are different from all other human peers who had been exposed in the course of time to physical maltreatment or death, mental torments and self-hatred. Because of these enduring memories of the past, the racial issue continues to be a central theme of American culture.²⁹ After almost thirty years since the beginning of affirmative action, West remarked that the racial progress of the American society cannot be denied, yet in the same time it should not be dealt with in quantitative, naïve formulas. The so-called “progress”, claimed West, brought about the fragmentation of the black community, the rise of inequality along with the recognition of black political and cultural identity. In this respect, West referred specifically to the appearance of the black conservatives.³⁰ Postmodern consumerism and the absence of a black leadership caused the stagnation of the black community in almost all regards, or in other forms to what the American intellectual and professor named the “white supremacy”, a direct menace to the ideals of democracy.

Direct and radical, as I have already mentioned, West considered that nihilism is the greatest evil of the African American community, seen as the expression of social isolation, lack of signification, absence of human love and hope.³¹ Interpreting the black Americans’ struggle for survival in a metaphorical language, sometimes even in an extravagant one, West sought to debunk also the nihilism of the consumerist society, the hedonism of the market mentality which annihilates the personality of the present day African American. In a relevant manner for the theme of culture wars and Barack Obama’s autobiographies, West wrote about “the eclipse of hope and the collapse of meaning”³² which stressed out the

presence of racial vulnerability. Resuming the course of the W.E.B. Du Bois's thought, West looked at the only political and social remedy, the necessary emerging of a responsible black leadership, a different one from the black middle class.³³ West made it adamant that black political leaders could be but managers for a race which has not acquired a distinct importance. Black leaders could be classified according to him into "race-effacing managerial leaders, leaders who identify themselves with the racial protest, prophetic leaders who go far beyond the racial issues".³⁴ In this original classification, president Barack Obama would probably occupy the last position, demonstrating that his policies have addressed all American citizens, and not only black Americans, a reason for which Cornel West might still think that the victimization of African Americans continues, even if in less striking forms.

Taking into account the existence of the black conservatives, one is nowadays aware of different ideological expressions amidst the black community. At the same time one is compelled to remark on the repercussions of culture wars in what regards racial identity, multiculturalism, black individualism, education and economic opportunities. Thomas Sowell a well known conservative author argued in one of his books that "the prevailing misconceptions of the histories of both blacks and whites in America derive from trying to amalgamate morality and causation" in the attempt to raise the history of slavery to the rank of a general explanation for all negative social phenomena in black America.³⁵ For Sowell, the history of African Americans as well as the history of slavery became the place of splitting confrontations between ideologically opposed visions. In this sense, Sowell contested multiculturalism, describing it as a utopian equality of all cultures without accounting for the achievements of some cultures apart of the rest, or considering the first ones to have been detrimental to the latter ones.³⁶ Sowell offered the example of the notion of "prejudice" which was transformed in a fearful weapon in order to prove existence victimization and racial hegemony, not only at the expense of American blacks, but also of all minorities in the United States.³⁷ Furthermore, he criticized the dogmatic points of view according to which general progress in some economically and socially lagging behind communities should be helped by building of an ethnic group conscience, by asserting the group's ethnic and identifying self-hate which had shackled the members of the group to enjoy equality and freedom.³⁸ In these examples, Sowell denounced the prevalence of the community over individuals, deploring the process of „taking sides" in history³⁹, a process which indicates the ideologization of history and culture, disseminating willingly the seeds of culture wars, in one direction or in the other.

Shelby Steele, another conservative author examined critically the racial rhetoric, writing that "race is a separate reality in America society, an entity that carries its own potential for power, a mark for fate that class

can soften considerably, but not eradicate".⁴⁰ Analyzing the mechanism of the racial rhetoric Steele pursued the mode in which the images of prejudice, victimization and innocence have built in years the representation of power. Steele believed that the moral persuasion in the manifestation of power did not consist only in the discourse of hegemony and of domination, but also in "narratives" of subordination, or in assuming "innocence" as a lack of defense against cultural imperialism. In the same respect, further remarking on racial prejudice, Steele observes that "seeing for innocence" stood for a common form of racial rhetoric in many instances, not only in the case of the African Americans, inducing the idea that the abuse of innocence by the hegemonic, dominant part showed the goodness, moral superiority of the victimized ones.⁴¹ Taking as an example one of the most powerful images of the 1960s racial rhetoric "the white guilt", Steele said that the dissemination of the phrase created a paternalistic consequence, which impeded African American to fully use their autonomy as individuals in searching for their own solutions. In another book, decrying the condition of being a black conservative, Steele showed that victimization "was made to explain the hard fate of blacks in American history, but also to explain the current inequalities between blacks and whites and the difficulties blacks have in overcoming them".⁴² Victimization meant for Steele a 'totalism' caused in his view by transformations of the 1960s liberalism.⁴³ It follows that for Steele, as for other conservative authors, multiculturalism restrained the character of African-American culture to an ideological imagery of repression and victimized subordination⁴⁴, which in fact highlighted the politicization of culture and the widening of the split created in interpretation of culture(s) even before the culture wars had broken out. Dealing only with the notion of „white guilt“, with its history and its redoubtable cultural and psychological pressure laid on the American public sphere, Steele claimed that "multiracial societies need a moral balancing" after the ideologization process of culture and the employment of racial rhetoric.⁴⁵ Pointing explicitly to the existence of a culture war which started in the 1960s between two cultures, respectively between the upholding of values and the dissociation of rights, Steele thought that the progress of the civil rights was followed by a cultural decline, by the abandoning of liberalism.⁴⁶

James Davies Hunter was the first author who employed the term "culture wars" to cover cultural, political and media phenomena whose content and manifestations were clearly different from the German 19th century "Kulturkampf". Though there is a formal contradiction in associating "wars" to "culture", the expression "culture wars" was successfully used to describe the cultural and eventually radical partisanship which appeared at the end of the 20th century in the United States, focusing on the "definition of America" as J.D. Hunter termed the cause of the ongoing conflict of interpretations. Long before culture wars

had been sparked in the United States, culture had been deemed as being either the guardian of tradition or as impersonating the innovating factor in society, ascertaining in both cases unity, ensuring continuity or urging to resistance against political regimes, even determining their overthrowing. After Enlightenment, the sphere of culture became crucially important for the ideas of progress and emancipation, for the development of the concepts of nation and nationalism, as well as for the specific political culture of every nation. It was due to the high ideals of Enlightenment that the notion of intellectual appeared in connection with culture, and not long after its birth, the intellectual influenced deeply the cultural, social, political modernization. Once secularization conquered the West and expanded in all strata of the American society, first as a diffuse and then as a bolder and bolder manifestation, a spirit of confrontation began to animate different spheres of society. Autonomy of thinking was assumed by more and more intellectuals, though a great many of them fought also for leading state or party positions, turning into mandarins of power. In Europe, “culture” and “war” coexisted in many instances in a half-visible, half-invisible conflicts, as for instance, in the way the great forerunner of postmodernism, Friedrich Nietzsche reflected on modernity, power and culture in his *Gay Science*. Referring to the same period, in the Anglo-American world, Mathew Arnold’s defining culture as “sweetness and light”, embodied a clear sense superiority and exclusiveness. The relativization of culture, caused by the trivialization of the cultural sphere under different political regimes, as for instance in communism or Nazism, showed the versatility of the concept in modernism and postmodernism alike. In this regard, attempting to connect relativization of culture, culture wars and cultural experience, I chose to refer to some interpretations focusing on the above mentioned topic, pertaining to Reinhart Koselleck and Giorgio Agamben.

Reflecting on the dynamics of the concept of culture, theorist Reinhart Koselleck defined culture as “a political meta-concept which demonstrates explicitly its religious origin”.⁴⁷ In this definition of culture, the German historian favored a non-exclusive argument which pleads in favor of connecting the concept of culture to other fields in a larger horizon of human activity. By putting into an indirect connection religion, culture and politics, Koselleck underlined that culture is cannot be represented as an “institution”, though a great many institutions, associations, parties, partially churches claim to have grown within a “cultural” light. The limits of the concept of culture are still evasive and the attempt to contain or melt them down into ideological, ethnic, aesthetic channels of communication may distort the living sense of culture as creative practice, moral heritage and as a meaning of humanity. In the same train of thoughts, interpreting the concepts of “emancipation” and of “enemy” in modernity, Koselleck pointed out that they are central to the perception of culture and progress. “Emancipation”

is seen by Koselleck as an iterative concept, “a continual provocation” whose aim is to suppress or to diminish the hiatus existing between juridical dispositions and political action.⁴⁸ The concept of the “enemy”, according to the German theorist changed its meaning in modernity due to its strong radicalized use, the enemy being regarded as a non-human.⁴⁹ In approaching the concept of culture from the perspective of culture wars, it is worth mentioning that for Koselleck the present time is imagined under “the pressure of future”.⁵⁰ The idea of change including cultural change is seen by Koselleck as occurring at shorter and shorter intervals, as the shortness of the change intervals becomes a marking sign of progress. Arguing about the meaning of historical change and progress, Koselleck upheld that imagining the course of history is more substantial and sustainable if drawing the map of the “space of experience” and of the “horizon of expectation”, two notions coined in the resemblance of the space and time concepts.⁵¹ In elaborating on the two notions, Koselleck brought relevant arguments in favor of the interrelations between the two, remarking on their “tension”, and on the actual production of “historical time”. Whether for a long time, before the Enlightenment the relationship between the two terms of the equation of the historical time was described by Koselleck being relatively stable, during the last phases of modernity, in especially in the present time, the German theorist stated that the “horizon of expectation” outran the other component of the above mentioned representation. Koselleck underlined the divergence between the two planes of the historical time, adding that the “horizon of expectations” had become detached from the space experience.⁵²

In *What is An Apparatus?* Giorgio Agamben debated on the implications of the term “apparatus” (*dispositif*) used by Foucault, in connection with “governmentality” and “government of men”. The Italian philosopher reviewed the meaning of the term, stating that it referred to “a set of practices both linguistic and nonlinguistic to face an urgent need to obtain an effect that is more or less immediate”.⁵³ Agamben thought in this way that language itself is in the modern society such an “apparatus”, besides the other meanings showing the hidden power of “governmentality” conferred by Foucault to prisons, madhouses, clinics, or generally by the “panopticum” pattern.⁵⁴ In this regard, one could refer to the subjective narrative which shapes an autobiography as a public dispositive meant to convince and win over the audience with the help of an author’s ideas or “self”. Autobiographies are self-accounts about one’s experience and to the great many they continue to speak about their authors’ vital choices at the crossroads of decisive moments. The originality and authenticity of experience caught within the frames of an autobiographical account is seldom wholly checked up by readers, but it is accepted as a possible “other life” that readers might experience in a world of a diminishing specter of experiences. Analyzing the quality of experience in modernity, Giorgio Agamben dwelt on the precariousness of

present experience in the sense that “it is no longer accessible to us”.⁵⁵ The modern individual was considered by Agamben as not being able to translate into an “experience” the banality and the repetitive pattern of everyday life. The counter effect of civilization and modernization has brought the “experiencing” of human experiences to a halt, or at least forced them to a mimetic stance. The translating of all experiences into the language of the media has already created a pattern of experience-ability as a token of recognition and success which selects in and out all experiences, according to a sellable “model”, wrote Agamben.

On the other side, “the expropriation of experience”, as Agamben characterized the condition of the experience in our (post)modernity, left individuals without the capacity to channel their own occurrences into “experiences” and respectively, not to be able to follow the message of the others’ experiences but through the seducing discourse of the stardom, within which Barack Obama’s autobiographies were read, as well. The paradox of the expropriated experience in Agamben’s view consists in the cleavage between experience and authority, acknowledged in the fact that in the autobiographical genre, the autobiographical hero recounts his/her experiences under the impersonal authority of the “telling”, without which life remains silent, as in the case of the overwhelming majority of those who do not write autobiographies. Culture is “first and foremost a particular experience of time and no new culture is possible without an alteration of this experience” wrote Agamben. As far as autobiographies are concerned one may interpret his remark as pointing to an authorial narrative, displaying a limited authority in constructing what Agamben named “the time of the experience”.⁵⁶

More concretely, in the case of culture wars, cultural and political contention has emerged from the intricate fabric of American civilization: democracy interpreted in the sense of being the source of equality. Culture wars stand for reactions, positive or negative regarding multiculturalism, feminism, racial and sexual identity, immigration, education, authority, religion, to name only some of the culture wars specific fields which aggregated explosive issues sending shockwaves into the once impervious shield of tradition. Though, the rhetoric of the culture wars bears a great similitude to religious salvation, it is surprising that in the days of globalization, culture wars have prophesized an *end* of the common tradition rather than the advent of a future for all. In the religious haze of the *end* which has been stylistically imprinted into the message of culture wars, one could surmise the growing discontentment with liberalism which after the sixties barely survives, the scathing criticism addressed to conservatives, the radicalization of ecologists and increasing anarchism of American public life (the rise of crime and violence in everyday life).

In the first chapter in *Culture Wars*, J.D. Hunter remarks saliently on the enmity and hostility which featured the debates and/or viewpoints in

American culture, perceiving the will to dominate contaminating a part over the other, being “religiously framed”.⁵⁷ The camp of traditionalists and the one of progressives enrolled adherents from all strata of society, so that not only the definition of American, but also almost everything concerning America was at stake. Opinions relied less and less on tradition and on mores, as Tocqueville said about Americans, but instead on the will to change and on the apparent irreversibility of this will. Hunter described America as a huge area of conflict, imbued with a streak of inflammatory optimism, in the sense that eventually progress will triumph against the resistance of conservatives. A total cultural war would be necessarily waged according to Hunter’s views, so that, the transformation of America would have been thoroughly completed and the chances for progress saved. Hostility and enmity are less threatening when inspiring progressives rather than traditionalists, or at least, this seemed to me to be J.D.Hunter’s conviction:

“The first mistake we should guard against is to view culture war as merely the accumulation of social issues debated today (such as abortion, the values in school, homosexuality, or the meaning of Columbus’s discovery of America). The culture war encompasses these issues, but the source of the conflict is found in different moral visions.[...]. Yet the cultural conflict continues – and it continues without any sign that it will soon abate”.⁵⁸

After a relatively short interval, namely in 2006, in *Is There a Culture War*, the relevance and consequences of culture wars was reviewed by a group of four authors, including J.D. Hunter himself. The four essays focusing on culture wars from different cultural and political stances, present an actual report on the American ethos. Besides re-emphasizing older opinions, J.D. Hunter ponders in this new account on culture wars on “the nature of culture”⁵⁹ linking the breaking point of culture war with the changing of the definitions of culture from postwar period, namely passing from a “totalizing” definition to a “de-totalized” one. In this respect, Hunter underlined the plurality of culture(s) in America, re-enhancing the question whether political and religious pluralism would be relevant without cultural pluralism, and whether this latter notion would be transparent without rendering the specificity of multiculturalism in postwar America. The tendency of a modern culture to represent diversity and conflict is natural, says Hunter.⁶⁰ Refuting the opinions according to which culture wars were fought by intellectuals only, and thinking that the real “e pluribus unum” was a political convention masking a forced unity, J.D. Hunter remarked on the disappearance of the “middle” in the heated debate on culture in America. Reminding what Phillip Rieff said about culture wars (“the form of fighting before the fighting began”),

Hunter believed that the main and central question of culture wars is the definition of liberalism as difference, or as the freedom to be different.⁶¹

For Allan Wolfe, Hunter's main contender, culture wars did not amount in fact to the dramatic reality they were hammered into.⁶² Elaborating on Galbraith's term of "conventional wisdom", Wolfe sustained that culture wars may be reduced to an ideological formula used by intellectuals to drag the smoldering fire of their debates outside the walls of universities. Having contributed substantially to the definitions of American liberalism and religion, Allan Wolfe did not deny however the existence of "something called a culture war".⁶³ Wolfe's redefining culture wars places a special emphasis on the "situation" (the cultural topos) due to which religion and politics have intertwined, after they had been regarded as separate fields and domains of interest. The nature of this "situation", actually, "position" but also "construction", explains the increasing partisanship of culture wars. Cultural circumstances allowing political partisanship have always been current in American life and not only. If one moves away from this rather trite observation, say in the direction of examining the more profound changes occurring in the "American mind", or "American imaginary" it would not be difficult to find out other branching out positions regarding the process of secularization or rather its counterpart, de-secularization. The newly discussed role of religion did not bring on only the almost forgotten concept of "belief", but also it empowered emotions in creating and representing public opinion. The new "situation" in which secularists do not come to term with believers defines the new spirit of America, the sense of the moral battle for the "soul" of America, as the beginning of culture wars was once pronounced, or simply, the reality of a hiatus.

Without elaborating on the question of secularization and de-secularization, which would have seemed out of place under the title of the volume, Allan Wolfe thought that the trace of culture wars is to be observed in the manner in which culture and politics were reoriented in the "new situation". Namely, that culture took to the left, while politics to the right (as a retrospective remark made in 2006).⁶⁴ At the same time, Wolfe endorsed the opinion that actually Americans did not fall under different banners of cultural wars, but they acted moderately, keeping apart from political partisanship, encouraging thus a liberal public attitude. Reasserting the already legendary middle class values of the Americans, and wishing to elevate them in to a kind of political wisdom, Wolfe wanted to reconnect the present "situation" in America with other historical thresholds of American history and life, as the Civil War one. The Americans' capacity to relocate their trust under the symbols of American democracy and liberalism resolves for Allan Wolfe the actual the crisis of the situation due to which culture and politics merged in a bellicose alliance.

Following previous remarks on culture wars, but bringing a different viewpoint, Gertrude Himmelfarb sustained that actually culture wars were brought to an end, by the progressives' victory. The conservative refusal to take into account culture wars of is eloquent in detaching the meaning of culture from that of the counter-culture, and thus opening a new level of debates, namely on the moral quality of popular culture.⁶⁵ Though the triumph of the progressives cannot be contested, one cannot ignore a certain passive resistance against the "new" conquering of the Left, especially in the field of education. Himmelfarb thought that culture wars' unequivocal outcome is dissident culture. Culture wars irreversibly modified the "time experience" of the American society. In this regard, culture wars have won a ravaging fame over America. One of the major consequences of culture wars in America was that the definition of culture gradually changed and that culture warriors came to outnumber intellectuals, who were considered during the 20th century to represent culture generally and particularly. The diminishing position of intellectuals in contrast with the sphere of the experts, and the expanding media revolution which brought along with the transformation of the notion of "author" (for instance author v. blogger) resulted into a varied stratification of culture players and culture consumers. In connection with this consequence, one should also consider the fact that since culture wars took to the streets, so to say, the canon of American literature for instance, appeared for many as a benchmark of the democratization of the American canon itself, but also as an expanding circle of the culture consumption. Furthermore, culture wars were regarded as means of political stylization of culture, setting up a new and sensitive correspondence between culture and politics at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of a new millennium. By "stylization" I mean not only a conventionally 'correct' representation of culture, a standardization, but a disambiguation of culture for each and every culture consumer. Since culture has stopped being considered as an avenue restricted only to the few, another possible conflict might arise between the unpredictability of cultural creation and cultural standardization. As civil society and political parties in America construe differently the meanings of democracy and of the American creed, culture wars may have become in themselves an American symbol.

In a relatively recent critical account on culture wars, Irine Taviss Thomson succeeded to go beyond the notion of culture wars, analyzing the polarization of the media, academia and intellectuals, remarking that the actual divisions between the "orthodox" and the "progressive" render a harsh competition between two visions brought to the extremes. Taviss Thomson underlined that the polarization of the American society was exaggerated, because culture wars had been fought mainly by culture warriors for prestige rather than for solving the current dilemmas of the American society.⁶⁶ Though the majority of Americans tend to favor a

center position, culture wars cannot be underestimated in their further consequences, mainly in the orienting public opinion toward a divisive, fragmented view of the society, eventually undermining the credibility of institutions, causing disillusionment and disbelief concerning in the symbols of America. Taviss Thomson considered that culture wars might continue because of the disparities existing in the present American public sphere, namely, respect for religion, without specifying however its role in a secular society, a claim for moral standards lacking in institutional support, a strong manifestation of individualism counterbalanced by the respect for pluralism, an ambivalent regard for the elites, who are actually the reserve of culture warriors and a public praise given to moderation which is denied by the violence of culture wars.⁶⁷

Taviss Thompson evaluated the continuing and unpredictable course of culture wars, wondering if the American society has got the capability of taking wise decisions, while common standards are gradually diminishing in importance. This seems to be for Taviss Thompson the most serious consequence of culture wars: the weakening, or worse, the loss of institutional power.⁶⁸ But at the same time, Taviss Thompson noted on that such ominous expectations were not undergirded by real facts, which shows that far from involving the majority of the Americans, culture wars represent an ideological response to the current questions of democracy in the United States. Behind the political screen, the polarization between orthodox and progressives stems in the variety of definitions given to culture beginning with the 1950s, when the modernization of the American cultural became a cultural battlefield. The unprecedented fragmentation of the meaning of culture was not caused only because of the theory of the pluralism of cultures (Clifford Geertz), of culture seen as a toolkit (Ann Swidler), or of culture understood only as a treasure chest of values as in the writings of conservatives. The political and cultural turmoil of culture wars, affecting superficially only the opinions and beliefs of the Americans as according to Taviss Thompson cannot be separated from the secularization and modernization processes, so that the much appraised “unity” and harmony of the ideal of culture may be today but only a nostalgic reality.⁶⁹

In the meantime the notion of culture wars stated to be employed in other parts of the world than the United States, even in relation to other periods of time than the postmodern age when culture wars appeared as such. The American model of culture wars implying confrontations betraying ideological or political antagonistic foundations was applied to other cultural areas and as I have mentioned, to other historical periods, which actually extrapolates the American context of culture wars and it projects it elsewhere. Edward Muir wrote for instance about the existence of culture wars in late Renaissance, defining them as „an eclectic wave of cultural activities” which involved polemically the intellectuals of the time”.⁷⁰ Cristopher Prendergast revisited the nineteenth century France,

shedding light on Saint-Beuve and his literary criticism, remarking on the “culture wars” of French literary culture, bringing to the fore the critic’s lack of perceptivity for the works of Balzac and Proust.⁷¹ The phrase “culture wars” was used in the context of modern Egypt and of its cultural dissensions, laying emphasis on controversies between religious and intellectual factors.⁷² David McKnight drew a parallel between culture wars in the United States and Australia from the conflicting perspectives of feminism and multiculturalism. McKnight wrote about the fact that starting with the 1990s, in Australia began a period of “a moral anxiety” caused by the liberal economy, consumerism and the manifestation of a “cultural revolution”.⁷³

McKnight remarked that culture wars demonstrate an increasing anxiety for the “post-material” world, arguing thus that these “wars” are waged exclusively in order to redefine culture and identity in countries with a multiracial background.⁷⁴ This stands for a salient proof that it was not the so-called American globalization, or American cultural hegemony which extended the area of culture wars, but the very course of postmodern culture within which the assertion of the plurality of identities raised unsurpassable walls inside the traditional middle class society. McKnight observed that the rhetoric of culture wars is fluid, passing from one camp of the cultural battlefield to the other, looking for vindication and moving further, striving for the enrolment of new adherents. The fragmentation and the relativization caused by culture wars are by far more important, unwanted consequences than the publicly asserted goals of defending traditional values or bringing liberal policies for the ascertaining of equality and progress. McKnight characterized culture wars as struggles for representation whose fundamental value is but emotion clothed in either a political or religious vocabulary. For others, culture wars were not seen as being comparable only with the conditions existing of the United States. Adam K. Webb considered for instance that one witnessed nowadays a global culture war, a deadly confrontation between a generic liberalism founded on Euro-Atlantic fundaments and the cultural behaviors of the rest of the world which paved the way to “a new sensibility”.⁷⁵

Certainly, when broaching the issue of culture wars, one cannot reach a complete image without bringing into discussion, even briefly, the role of intellectuals seen as culture warriors. Without getting carried away from the subject matter of the article, I want to refer to some outstanding meanings given to the notion of the “intellectual” which appeared in nineteenth century Europe in the midst of a growing dissension about culture itself and its relations to political matters. The role of intellectuals in the modern, secular society has not ceased to be examined, criticized, extolled in a multitude of opinions which mirrors the distinct and divergent views to be found in the cultural memory of each modern country. Edward Said remarked on the danger lying in the present

circumstances in which the image of the intellectual would succumb under a mass of details. Therefore, he said that what distinguishes the intellectual is his/her capacity of representation articulated in a message, discourse, view, opinion. Said upheld that the intellectual should be aware about the function of representation, his *raison d'être*, so that his bent to dogmatic views, power or in general, to partiality or bias would be accounted as the evident corrupting of the meaning and role of the intellectual. In Said's view, the intellectual is seen as the guardian of public virtue. It is the reason why Said claims that the intellectuals' legitimating of power, their obedience to the taste of the audience for gaining prestige or recognition lead to the demise from the moral status of the intellectual.⁷⁶

Christopher Lasch examined the paradoxes of the postmodern America society from the perspective of the growing distance existing between elites and masses in the United States. He named the estrangement of the elites a "revolt" in a parallel to Gasset's "revolt of the masses". For Lasch, the revolt of the elites consisted in the betraying of democracy, showing that the elites moved toward extremes, leaving behind the ideals of the middle class, the symbolic social pillar of modernization and democracy in the United States.⁷⁷ Common ideals were abandoned and the result did not tarry to appear in a fragmented society in which castes began to prevail. Lasch wondered what was the meaning of the once familiar phrase of "being an American". The lack of interest manifested by American elites in matters such as the present state of the nation, culture, and the "American way", as a forgotten common trait of all Americans stand for an example of increasing social and political cleavage, threatening the ideals of democracy. The easy-going acceptance of multiculturalism brought into the limelight the imagery of a cultural bazaar where no one establishes clear, individual responsibilities. Lasch deplored the "tourist", or the "transit" mentality of the elites which allowed them to be disengaged from social life in a pose of material complacency and class superiority. The dominant cultural feature of the present, said Lasch, was nostalgia which clearly showed that if separation from the past has already happened, future remained in the same distant, an unreachable realm.⁷⁸ Along the same vein, making a comparison with antebellum intellectuals, Russell Jacoby found that the quality of intellectual life plummeted.⁷⁹ The impoverishment of intellectual discourse accelerated the rhythm of the political radicalization of the academe and the transformation of the university into a "market" accommodating students as customers. All these, considered Jacoby depreciated the meaning of the intellectual, its authority and role.⁸⁰

Culture wars and the meaning of being an intellectual have been closely interlocked toward the end of the nineteenth century in American, considered Susan Jacoby. Looking at the present day cultural contention, Susan Jacoby remarked that there is a continuation between nowadays

culture wars and what she tagged as being “the morning of America’s culture wars”, the conflict between religion and science, and the assertion of social Darwinism in nineteenth century America.⁸¹ Relying on the classic definitions of social Darwinism stated by Richard Hofstadter, one can review in this context the parts played by politics, politicians and as well as of the great tycoons of the period, who promoted a class-biased vision on social relations, legitimizing inequality in wealth and also in cultural sphere.⁸² The aftermath of this culture war *avant-la-lettre* was pivotal for the further development of the American culture, admitted Susan Jacoby, mainly because of the media which conveyed to the middle class audience and then to the large masses the ideas of the social Darwinism and of the „homemade intellectual” alike.⁸³ Emersonian individualism was substituted by the “rugged” individualism, leading to a parallel between natural and social selection. In the “morning of the culture wars” in America, technology started to build the foundations of a new order, rewarding conformity, inducing a state social of passivity and moral relativism thought to incarnate the symptoms of an „overarching crisis”.⁸⁴ Looking from the perspectives an American fin-de-siècle, Susan Jacoby exhorted intellectuals to account rationally for their ideological positions, and to alert the public, showing the great dangers of cultural fragmentation and isolation.⁸⁵

Further on, debating on the notion of “cultural rights”, Michael Walzer touched on one the most sensitive issues of culture wars going on in America: the existence of cultural communities. Walzer considers cultural communities as “involuntary associations”, looking critically at the demands of these communities in the context of liberal democracy. Cultural communities fight to preserve the right to a free, unimpeded social reproduction, since, as seen in a number of cases, cultural specificity might be jeopardized by consequences of globalization.⁸⁶ Walzer showed that cultural communities are more inclined to accept from the part of their members “divided loyalties”⁸⁷ than letting democratic pluralism provide their members with the benefices of democratic citizenship. In this respect, cultural communities, strongly built around an ethnic or religious kernel, wish not only to preserve but also to expand their past in the hyphenated identity solution. In fact, in many such cultural communities individual rights are no longer recognized, and individuals lack in being informed about democratic principles undergirding democratic politics, as well as economic skills for their necessary autonomy.⁸⁸ Multiculturalism, preached and professed in cultural communities may result into the assertion of the preeminent role of the community over the individual, restraining the liberty of individuals, and slighting the very idea of democracy.⁸⁹ Facing this complex situation, Walzer upheld that the values of the democratic state must take precedence over the communities’ point of view for certain purposes, though it is difficult to observe such distinct purposes, because every

occasion may turn into such a purpose, actually an opportunity for dispute or further political bargaining.⁹⁰ Thus, one faces the dilemma of allowing cultural communities to take the lead over individuals, or to empower individuals to find their ways out, pushing them against the traditions of their communities. In Walzer's opinion, liberal democracy is by far more tolerant even when it does not accept the intolerance of religion or ethnicity, because, in time, liberal democracy succeeded to contain both fundamentalism and nationalism, curbing down gradually their vehemence.⁹¹ But in spite of these comforting findings Walzer remarked that there are no feasible solutions resulting directly from principles, but through a series of compromises. At present or later, one can surmise that the question of relativism versus principledness in a liberal democracy may be raised, showing decreasing democratic involvement.⁹²

A pertaining view on the atmosphere of American culture wars and political stage before the historical elections of 2008 is contained in the Alan Wolfe's scrutiny on the meanings of American democracy at the dawning of a new millennium. Being of the opinion that the American democracy has evolved in cycles, and that at that moment, in 2006, the end of the conservative cycle was approaching, Wolfe considered that republicans did not provide safety for the further course of democracy. Quite on the contrary, they repeatedly attacked the foundations of the democratic consensus, and along this line, their backing of culture wars epitomized the profound moral and cultural dissensions in American society.⁹³ Wolfe compared two types of democracy which developed at the end of the past century, the liberal democracy and conservative one, claiming that culture wars were born as an enactment of the nineteenth century religious morality and populism. Putting the whole equation of power in simpler terms, said Wolfe, one faced the option for "more democracy" because "more democracy is better democracy", or the option keep vigil so that America should be clear from the excesses of liberalism, because "America is too democratic for its own good".⁹⁴ Culture wars were beneficial for conservatives, admitted Wolfe, envisaging that the moralist rhetoric employed by republicans would not help the Republican in the next future (the book was written in 2006), and that the conservatives would head toward "huge deficits and an all-powerful executive branch".⁹⁵ Wolfe's strong point was that liberal democracy, the consolidated form of the American democracy could not be buttressed by conservative policies and their warmonger rhetoric, which is an irrefutable conclusion pinning down the split in the intellectual and political life of nowadays America.

It is evident that culture wars are interpreted on each side of the political stage as strategies to win over the adversary and to gain the support of the public sphere, but in fact they weaken the confidence in democracy. Yet looking from another perspective, contemplating the cultural and political experience of Eastern Europe for instance one

cannot deny that culture wars are not the embodiment of democracy, at least of a formal one. At the same time, another question remains unanswered, namely whether culture wars reflect the inflammable debates of the elites, or if they portray the deep cleaving the masses into antagonist camps. Under the circumstances, the danger of weakening the confidence in democracy appears clearly in the distrust of the governed, as to their formal representation, in the disillusionment of the voters who often compare the government with a caste. The 2008 election of senator Obama as president of the United States did not put an end to culture wars, and furthermore, during the first months of the economic crisis, strong accuses were brought to the immorality of the rich who continued to get even richer, as known, in spite of the appeals to atone the greediness of the financial groups. Therefore, there seem to be few chances that culture wars be subdued in the event of the assertion of a more cohesive sense of participative democracy. Due to this, though I do not share Francis Fukuyama's deep pessimism⁹⁶, I tend to agree that the decline of the communitarian life and the eagerness for recognition, according to the terms used by Fukuyama, will add new fuel to the old as well as to the new culture wars.

Since Benjamin Franklin, autobiographies have been cultivated and appraised in America, a country whose ties with the age of the Enlightenment have more than often regarded as unique. At the same time, autobiography played, as known, a cardinal role in the making of the African-American culture, bringing into view the metamorphosis of a community's awareness and its impact on the white majority. Autobiography contributed substantially in rewriting the cultural memory in the cultural globalization process, as the manifestation of the "local" and the reassessing of the "voice(s)" suppressed due to various aspects of domination.⁹⁷ Barack Obama's autobiographies represented the author's intention to reveal the architecture and inner history of an identity in the course of its political formation. Working under the horizon of higher aspirations than any other young politicians, Barack Obama used his personal history along with major references to the post 1960s democratic development of the United States in order to assert his possible future as a representative one, mainly in regard to democratic American tradition.

In this respect the relevance of the autobiography is not as much retrospective but "projective", a fact which upholds that the author employed his own life experience to underscore the promise of his political future. In the following, I shall illustrate a couple of thematic motifs in Obama's autobiographical works, stressing the author's ability to merge the perspective of the past with the intuition of a necessary reforming of political and cultural American issues. The principal motif is the author's awareness of the limits of the genre of autobiography, meaning that Barack Obama intended to explore and exploit the tradition of the genre from a historical and/or political point of view, rather than

from a literary one, to accomplish the overall aim of his writing: letting the American public know him. In this respect, the political “shadows” of the present are easily recognizable. The author wished to draw an ampler image of the moment from *his* own perspective, attempting to persuade the reader to construe deeper significations by relying on his *telling* the story of a life. A life’s account may be even more interesting due to the fact it is the life of an American senator who agrees to report on his personal ascension in the world of power. The reason why power and the story of the making of an African American politician captivated the interest of international readers, not only of the American ones consists in the crisis of the American exceptionalism, mainly after 2001, or rather in its crude manifestations, the war against terrorism and the conflicting issues of democracy in the George W. Bush administration. Through the glow of secrecy which envelops power in the above mentioned autobiographies, the reader can distinguish the dynamic personality of Barack Obama at different stages in a clearly subjective rendering, but so more attractive. Stemming in the young Obama’s first encounters with unseen barriers, power and its invisibility and visibility fascinated and intrigued Obama, because in those moments he did not have either suitable answers or the wisdom to react appropriately. The exertion of power and justice have appealed to him as well, since an early age, so probably the idea of starting his public career as a community organizer could be attributed to his reflections of power.

“Power. The word fixed in my mother’s mind as a curse. In America, it had generally remained hidden from view until you dug beneath the surface of things;[...]. But here power was undisguised, indiscriminate, naked, always fresh in the memory”

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It is relevant how power becomes imprinted in the racial issue, so suggestively rendered in *Dreams from my Father*. In the eyes of a young African American, power stands for a fearful difference and the attempt to domesticate and internalize it appears as a sort of survival strategy:

“It was in this context that I came across the picture in *Life* magazine of the black man who tried to peel off his skin. I imagine other black children, then and now, undergoing similar moments of revelation. Perhaps it comes sooner for most - the parents’ warning not to cross boundaries of a particular neighborhood, or the frustrations of not having hair like Barbie no matter how long you tease and comb, or the tale of a fathers’ or grandfather’s humiliation at the hands or an

employer or a cop, overheard while you're supposed to be asleep."⁹⁹

Barack Obama was conscious that raising the curtain on the making of a politician will naturally attract the American reader, out of curiosity first, but then, in order to follow the impulse to discriminate between right and wrong in political life, or because of the wish to share the political vision of a democrat, of an African-American origin. In this respect, the writing of an autobiography meant for senator Obama the best opportunity to disclose his ideas about race and religion, about the nature of ethnicity and of believing in equality and freedom. Stating from the beginning of this first autobiography what are his political views and cultural options, Barack Obama warned the reader in advance about the paths his confession will follow. The frankness of the narrative voice dispels any cloud of ambiguity, so that the reader might have a clear map of the author's views and intentions.

"Finally, there are the dangers inherent in any autobiographical work: the temptation to color events in ways favorable to the writer, the tendency to overestimate the interest one's experiences hold for others, selective lapses of memory. Such hazards are only magnified when the author lacks the wisdom of age; the distance than can cure one of certain vanities. I can't say that I've avoided all, or any, of these hazards successfully."¹⁰⁰

In the *Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama reiterated the fact that he is aware of the political implications of his autobiographical work. Elements of a whole political philosophy were contained in a condensed formulation, showing the determination of the political man to further struggle for the transformation of democratic ideals into everyday fully recognized standards. By sustaining that a politician cannot escape the pattern of his own life, Barack Obama stressed on his racial identity to vouchsafe in this way the actual meanings of democracy and definitely not in order to construe an image of racial pride.

"I suspect that some readers may find my presentation of these issues to be insufficiently balanced. To this accusation, I stand guilty as charged. I am a Democrat, after all; my views on most topics correspond more closely to the editorial pages of the *New York Times* than those of the *Wall Street Journal*. I am angry about policies that consistently favor the wealthy and powerful over average Americans, and insist that government has an important role in opening up opportunity to all.

I believe in evolution, scientific inquiry, and global warming; I believe in free speech, whether politically correct or politically incorrect, and I am suspicious of using government to impose anybody's religious beliefs—including my own—on nonbelievers. Furthermore, I am a prisoner of my own biography: I can't help but view the American experience through the lens of a black man of mixed heritage, forever mindful of how generations of people who looked like me were subjugated and stigmatized, and the subtle and not so subtle ways that race and class continue to shape our lives. [...]. I think America has more often been a force for good than for ill in the world; I carry few illusions about our enemies, and revere the courage and competence of our military. I reject a politics that is based solely on racial identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or victimhood generally. I think much of what ails the inner city involves a breakdown in culture that will not be cured by money alone, and that our values and spiritual life matter at least as much as our GDP. Undoubtedly, some of these views will get me in trouble".¹⁰¹

As J.T. Kloppenberg showed in an interesting interpretation of Obama's autobiographical works, the influence African-American autobiographers, essayists and writers from W.E.B. Du Bois to Ralph Ellison was primordial in Obama's tuning this narrative voice to the sensibility of a literary and political tradition. Along the same line, the writings of Martin Luther King and the autobiography of Malcolm X brought to light the specificity of African-American culture, as opposed to the white one. Kloppenberg underscored that Barack Obama made a clear cut distinction between the past of the struggle against slavery and segregation and the present moment, for which reason "racial" memory does not appear under the guise of a weapon for asserting collective rights, or for venting racial resentment, but as an incontestable testimony of the past, and at the same time of the distance separating nowadays the exclusivist pattern of America from the inclusive one.¹⁰²

"Over the next few months, I looked to corroborate this nightmare vision. I gathered up books from the library - Baldwin, Ellison, Hughes, Wright, Du Bois. At night I would close the door to my room, telling my grandparents I had homework to do, and there I would sit and wrestle with words, locked in suddenly desperate argument, trying to

reconcile the world as I'd found it with the terms of my birth. But there was no escape to be had. In every page of every book, in Bigger Thomas and invisible men, I kept finding the same anguish, the same doubt; a self-contempt that neither irony nor intellect seemed able to deflect."¹⁰³

Reaching a more mature threshold of experience in life, as all autobiographies tend to render the meaning of the passing of time in one's existence, senator Barack Obama gave a different account on race and on capacity of contemporary America to be a hospitable country for people with different cultural backgrounds. The overall image conferred to America is not an idyllic one, taking into account the lessons of the past, which cannot be forsaken in simply adhering to multiculturalism. But, it is neither a pessimistic foreseeing of the future of America. In the eyes of a democrat, America is and it will be perfectible. Resorting to the famous phrase "the content of out character" pronounced by Martin Luther King, Barack Obama evinced that partisan beliefs should not reach the point from where they could against the very idea of democracy, since it is neither the democrats' or the republicans' victory alone that will make democracy more complete. It was in this conviction that senator Obama cautioned politicians to keep the course of democracy against all perils, including especially exclusivist tactics. It is one of the paradoxes of liberal democracy that the integrity of democracy cannot be reached without defending a certain ideological line, a democratic or a republican one, though, eventually political wisdom infers that American democracy has always been a historical compromise between two interpretive strands of democracy.

"When I meet people for the first time, they sometimes quote back to me a line in my speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention that seemed to strike a chord: "There is not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America." For them, it seems to capture a vision of America finally freed from the past of Jim Crow and slavery, Japanese internment camps and Mexican braceros, workplace tensions and cultural conflict—an America that fulfills Dr. King's promise that we be judged not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character. [...]. In a sense I have no choice but to believe in this vision of America. [...]. In this we've been aided by a Constitution that—despite being marred by the original sin of slavery—has at its very core the idea of equal citizenship

under the law; and an economic system that, more than any other, has offered opportunity to all comers, regardless of status or title or rank. Of course, racism and nativist sentiments have repeatedly undermined these ideals; the powerful and the privileged have often exploited or stirred prejudice to further their own ends.”¹⁰⁴

The unavoidable reality of cultural confrontations is obviously present in *The Audacity of Hope* though the word “war” is not specifically mentioned. The emphasis laid on the reconstruction of the black community as well as of the American one, generally speaking on the multicultural, social, political issues, and the rebuilding of the American consensus, the political “peace” of the nation as well as the global role of the United States appears as an energetic, dynamic confidence in the ability of the American people to follow a new path to democracy. The “past” and “future” of an author who reflects upon his American condition, appraising emancipation rose to public attention not only as a political self-advertisement, but as a cultural statement of a public intellectual.¹⁰⁵ Barack Obama understood the role of autobiography as a means of transforming personal experience into the “wisdom” of time, so that it should be shared with others. Since autobiography means generally for readers a “written” life, appealing both to memory, or more exactly to a selective account of it, autobiography may also be understood as an impulse to take action in order to spare the public space, politics, democratic life from possible errors. More than often, there are many moral pieces of advice in the autobiographical narratives of Barack Obama, yet the tone of the author is far from being didactic or condescending. On the contrary, an impression of pleasant equality envelops the reader, who is thus persuaded to share the conclusions of the author about his views on America and on the world. The autobiographical narrator selected from the diversity of the personal experiences, but also from others’ happened not only in the United States but also on other continents, a sense of tolerance and understanding, a reflective attitude in approaching the promises of future. A strong emphasis is laid therefore on the interaction between individualism and communalism, knowing that these two dimensions of the American life remained since the times of Tocqueville’s definitions of the American exception, one of the most intricate aspects in the everyday construction of American democracy.

“In every society (and in every individual), these twin strands—the individualistic and the communal, autonomy and solidarity—are in tension, and it has been one of the blessings of America that the circumstances of our nation’s birth allowed us to negotiate these tensions better

than most. We did not have to go through any of the violent upheavals that Europe was forced to endure as it shed its feudal past. Our passage from an agricultural to an industrial society was eased by the sheer size of the continent, vast tracts of land and abundant resources that allowed new immigrants to continually remake themselves. But we cannot avoid these tensions entirely. At times our values collide because in the hands of men each one is subject to distortion and excess. Self-reliance and independence can transform into selfishness and license, ambition into greed and a frantic desire to succeed at any cost. More than once in our history we've seen patriotism slide into jingoism, xenophobia, the stifling of dissent; we've seen faith calcify into self-righteousness, closed-mindedness, and cruelty toward others. Even the impulse toward charity can drift into a stifling paternalism, an unwillingness to acknowledge the ability of others to do for themselves.”¹⁰⁶

A seemingly striking accent was put by Barack Obama on the role of religion in a secular and consumerist America. Far from being an exception for American politicians, religion is in a consolidated democracy a compelling and at the same time a difficult topic to tackle, knowing that America is a secular democracy and that the freedom of individuals and of democracy was traditionally viewed in connection with the freedom of religion and religious life. This is why Barack Obama's recurrent referring to religion demands culturally speaking a “contextual” perspective. Besides this, there are many memorable pages in which Obama accounted for his meetings with reverend Phillips. The atmosphere of simplicity, humanness and wisdom provided by the conversations senator Obama had with reverend Phillips, afterwards with reverend Wright lead the reader to see the particular role the church, particularly the Black Church, as an institution has had in the course of the last century. By recounting the dialoguing with the two reverends, but especially with reverend White, light was shed on one of the discrete so to say, areas of the public sphere, where people, simple and sophisticated, rich and poor, come to acknowledge the barriers lying between the everyday present and the wished, yet unseen future. It is apparent that the politician needed to approach the piety of the religious hope in order to understand the devoutness necessary to public service, if change was ever to come over America. No one can deny that the reporting of these meetings did not speak about the author's desire to show himself as a respectful member of the Black Church, fully integrated in his community and into its tradition, hinting thus to the author's representativeness and possible eligibility for

the highest leading position in the state. But even if admitting this, one should see the merits of Barack Obama to have opened a window to a better understanding of Martin Luther King, also of the new dimensions of religion.

“Now he was explaining the history of churches in Chicago, there were thousands of them, and it seemed as if he knew them all: the tiny storefronts and the large edifices; the high-yella congregations that sat stiff cadets as they sang from their stern hymnals, and the charismatics who shook as their bodies expelled God’s unintelligible tongue. Most of the larger churches in Chicago had been a blend of these two forms, Reverend Phillips explained, an example of segregations’ hidden blessings, the way it forced the lawyer and the doctor to live and worship right next to the maid and the laborer. Like a great pumping heart, the church has circulated goods, information, values, and ideas back and forth again, between rich and poor, learned and unlearned, sinner and saved.”¹⁰⁷

Though a strong militant for democracy, Barack Obama did not think that in fully applying the rule of democracy and policies of democratization there would an end for the notion of “race” in America. It is transparent that for Barack Obama at least, the time of the “post-racial” America has not yet arrived. It is therefore disputable why the implementation of the notion of “post-race” might be expected in a democracy hosting various cultural identities, a country where the tradition of constitutionalism does not impede citizens to pay respect to their cultural roots. The problem of the race remains a constant preoccupation of those who defend the concept of rights, but not for the republicans who criticized since the 1960s racial equality, and who, in the democrats’ eyes attempt to instill racial blindness under the mask of the post-racial reality. Obama urged his readers to contemplate reality as it was and not as it should have been after the thorough putting into practice of egalitarian policies. In this way, he counseled his readers to avoid fundamentalist ideas, as in the case of racially bent militants. But the same time he clearly warned against the danger of ignoring of racial issues. His moderate vision on the complexity of the race problems in the United States vouchsafed him as modern democrat beholding a vision of justice for all Americans.

“Still, when I hear commentators interpreting my speech to mean that we have arrived at a “postracial politics” or that we already live in a color-blind society, I have to offer a word of

caution. To say that we are one people is not to suggest that race no longer matters—that the fight for equality has been won, or that the problems that minorities face in this country today are largely self-inflicted. We know the statistics: On almost every single socioeconomic indicator, from infant mortality to life expectancy to employment to home ownership, black and Latino Americans in particular continue to lag far behind their white counterparts. In corporate boardrooms across America, minorities are grossly underrepresented; in the United States Senate, there are only three Latinos and two Asian members (both from Hawaii), and as I write today I am the chamber's sole African American. To suggest that our racial attitudes play no part in these disparities is to turn a blind eye to both our history and our experience—and to relieve ourselves of the responsibility to make things right.”¹⁰⁸

Finally, it is not at all by chance that the phrase “audacity of hope” was linked by Barack Obama to his symbolical intention of reclaiming the American dream. The “audacity” of hope does not suggest only the content of the religious feeling, viewed as a moral support necessary to transcend difficulties in uncertain or even politically troubled times. The “audacity” of hope does not remain fixed in its strictly religious sense. It crosses its common perception reaching toward a larger horizon, the public and political one. In this manner hope attains a secular understanding, that of following the expectation of progress, relying on rational, democratic policies. The connection existing between religion and politics is as old as American civil society, and by resuming it, senator Obama provided his second autobiography with a clear scope, that of reviving the Americans’ noble aspirations and pursuits for securing progress and republicanism. The “audacity” or reclaiming the American dream was possible only by rekindling hope, leaving behind the disillusionment of relativism and the cynicism of conservative politics. Senator Obama appealed to the spiritedness of ideals, making public his confidence in ideality, bringing as testimony part of his life story. The tacit understanding is that hope is too often kept secret, hidden, thus wasted into impossible longings and yearnings. The voicing of one’s hope may revive the sense of community and determine individuals to rely on each other. The audacity of hope represents the quintessential capacity to animate the community with a strong sense of participation. A politician’s duty, in Barack Obama’s eyes is that of conveying a message of hope not only to those who have lost it, but also to those who resist it. In the circumstances of competing with a conservative establishment, speaking

about hope was the necessary remedy to bring politics on the side of the people, thought the senator Obama. And he was so right as far as the 2008 elections are regarded. It was a rare historical occasion when “hope” could be addressed directly without awakening the demons of political demagoguery.

“The audacity of hope.

That was the best of the American spirit, I thought—having the audacity to believe despite all the evidence to the contrary that we could restore a sense of community to a nation torn by conflict; the gall to believe that despite personal setbacks, the loss of a job or an illness in the family or a childhood mired in poverty, we had some control—and therefore responsibility—over our own fate. It was that audacity, I thought, that joined us as one people. It was that pervasive spirit of hope that tied my own family’s story to the larger American story, and my own story to those of the voters I sought to represent.”¹⁰⁹

Notes

¹ Phillip Lejeune. *Pactul autobiographic*. (București: Univers, 2000), 13.

² Lejeune, 26.

³ Lejeune, 12.

⁴ Lejeune, 351-355.

⁵ 3. Phillip Dodds, “Criticism and the Autobiographical Tradition” in *Modern Selves. Essays on Modern British and American Autobiography* ed. Phillip Dodd. (London: Frank Cass, 1986, 2005), 1-14.

⁶ Dodds, 8.

⁷ Dodds, 10.

⁸ Jean Paul Sartre. *The Words*. (New York: George Braziller, 1964), 180.

⁹ Sartre, 243.

¹⁰ Boris Pasternak. *Safe Conduct*. (New York: the Signet Books, 1959), 15-16.

¹¹ Bertrand Russel. *Autobiography*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1975, 2010), 3.

¹² Angela Davies, preface to *An Autobiography* by Angela Davies (New York: International Publishers, 1974, 1988), xv-xvi.

¹³ Alabi Adetayo. *Telling Our Stories. Continuities and Divergencies in Black Autobiographies*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). 2.

¹⁴ Adetayo, 3.

¹⁵ Adetayo, 15.

¹⁶ Kenneth Mostern. *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics. Racialization in Twentieth Century America*. (Cambridge and London: The Cambridge University Press, 2004), 52.

¹⁷ Mostern, 137.

¹⁸ Ross Posnock. *Color and Culture. Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.

¹⁹ Calvin L. Hall, preface to *African American Journalists. Autobiography as Memoir and Manifesto* by Calvin L. Hall (Lanham, Maryland Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2009), i-xxvii.

²⁰ Hall, 90.

²¹ Hall, 91.

²² Hall, 92.

²³ Henry Louis, Gates Jr. *Loose Canons. Notes on the Culture Wars*. (Oxford, New York: The Oxford University Press, 1992), 49.

²⁴ Gates Jr, 62.

²⁵ Gates Jr, 101.

²⁶ Henry Louis, Gates Jr., Introduction to *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), vi-xxvii.

²⁷ Gates Jr. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man", xvii.

²⁸ Gates Jr. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man", xviii.

²⁹ Cornel West preface 2001 to *Race Matters* by Cornel West (New York: Vintage Books, 1993, 2002), xiii-xix.

³⁰ West, xiv.

³¹ West, 18-23.

³² West, 27.

³³ West, 57.

³⁴ West, 59.

³⁵ Thomas Sowell. *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*. (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2005), 56.

³⁶ Sowell, 247-248.

³⁷ Sowell, 251.

³⁸ Sowell, 256.

³⁹ Sowell, 278.

⁴⁰ Shelby Steele. *The Content of Our Character. A New Vision of Race in America*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 5.

⁴¹ Steele, 8.

⁴² Shelby Steele. *A Dream Deferred. The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* (New York: Harper Perennial 1998), 8.

⁴³ Steele, "A Dream Deferred", 13.

⁴⁴ Steele, "A Dream Deferred", 53.

⁴⁵ Shelby Steele, *White Guilt. How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 168.

⁴⁶ Steele, "White Guilt", 174-177.

⁴⁷ Reinhart Koselleck. 2009. *Conceptele si istoriile lor. Semantica si pragmatica limbajului social politic* (Bucuresti: Art, 2009), 113.

⁴⁸ Koselleck, 175.

⁴⁹ Koselleck, 236.

⁵⁰ Koselleck, 3.

⁵¹ Koselleck, 265-257.

⁵² Koselleck, 257.

⁵³ Giorgio Agamben. *Infancy and History. The Destruction of Experience* (London, New York: Verso, 2009), 8.

⁵⁴ Agamben, 14

⁵⁵ Agamben, 15

⁵⁶ Agamben, 91.

⁵⁷ James Davison Hunter. *Culture Wars. The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 42.

⁵⁸ Hunter, 48.

⁵⁹ James Davison Hunter, "The Enduring Culture War", in *Is There a Culture War?* ed. J.D. Hunter and Allan Wolfe, (Washington: Pew Research Center, Brookings Institution Center, 2006), 10-41.

⁶⁰ Hunter, "The Enduring Culture War", 33.

⁶¹ Hunter, 34.

⁶² Allan Wolfe, "The Culture War That Never Came", in *Is There a Culture War?* J.D. Hunter, Allan Wolfe, eds. (Washington: Pew Research Center, Brookings Institution Center, 2006), 41-74.

⁶³ Wolfe, "The Culture War That Never Came", 49.

⁶⁴ Wolfe, "The Culture War That Never Came", 55.

⁶⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "The Other Culture War", in *Is There a Culture War?* J.D. Hunter, Allan Wolfe, eds. (Washington: Pew Research Center, Brookings Institution Center, 2006), 74-83.

⁶⁶ Irene Taviss Thomson. *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 1.

⁶⁷ Taviss Thomson, 2.

⁶⁸ Taviss Thomson, 12.

⁶⁹ Taviss Thomson, 26.

⁷⁰ Edward Muir. *The Culture Wars of Late Renaissance. Skeptics, Libertines and the Opera*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, Harvard University Press, 2007). 1-2.

⁷¹ Christopher Prendergast. *The Classic. Saint-Beuve and the Nineteenth Century Culture Wars*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1-18.

⁷² Samia Mehrez. *Culture Wars in Egypt. Politics and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1-13.

⁷³ David McKnight. *Beyond Left and Right. New Politics and the Culture Wars* (Allen and Unwin, Australia, 2005), 139.

⁷⁴ McKnight, 141.

⁷⁵ Adam K. Webb. *Beyond the Global Culture War* (Routledge: London, 2006), 89.

⁷⁶ Edward Said. *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 11.

⁷⁷ Christopher Lasch. *La revolte des elites et la trahison de la democratie*. (Paris: Flammarion 1995, 1996), 17-18.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 244.

⁷⁹ Russell Jacoby. *The Last Intellectuals. American Culture in the Age of the Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 8-17.

⁸⁰ Jacoby, 200-219.

⁸¹ Susan Jacoby. *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), 61

⁸² Susan Jacoby, 69.

⁸³ Susan Jacoby, 74.

⁸⁴ Susan Jacoby, 309.

⁸⁵ Susan Jacoby, 312.

- ⁸⁶ Michael Walzer. *Politics and Passion. Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 44-46.
- ⁸⁷ Walzer, 47.
- ⁸⁸ Walzer, 50.
- ⁸⁹ Walzer, 55.
- ⁹⁰ Walzer, 56.
- ⁹¹ Walzer, 64.
- ⁹² Walzer, 65.
- ⁹³ Alan Wolfe. *Does American Democracy Still Work?* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 181-186.
- ⁹⁴ Wolfe, 2-4.
- ⁹⁵ Wolfe, 19.
- ⁹⁶ Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, Toronto: The Free Press, 1992), 328-333
- ⁹⁷ Andreas Huyssens. "Presents Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia" in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Durham and London: The Duke University Press, 2001), 57-78.
- ⁹⁸ Barack Obama. *Dreams from My Father* (New York: Canongate, 2008), 45.
- ⁹⁹ Obama, 51.
- ¹⁰⁰ Barack Obama, preface to *Dreams From My Father*, by Barack Obama (New York: Canongate, 2008), ix-xvii.
- ¹⁰¹ Barack Obama. *The Audacity of Hope. Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 8
- ¹⁰² J. T. Kloppenberg. *Reading Obama. Dreams, Hope and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Princeton University, 2011), 267-271.
- ¹⁰³ Obama, "Dreams from My Father", 86.
- ¹⁰⁴ Obama "The Audacity of Hope", 136.
- ¹⁰⁵ Kloppenberg, 37-41.
- ¹⁰⁶ Obama, "The Audacity of Hope", 34.
- ¹⁰⁷ Obama, "Dreams From My Father", 273.
- ¹⁰⁸ Obama, "The Audacity of Hope", 34.
- ¹⁰⁹ Obama, "The Audacity of Hope", 209.

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