

Concept CITY in Obama rhetoric

Jeffry Alexander, American sociologist:

**Political voting=symbolic
representation**

**Obama presidential rhetoric= telling
stories to the people**

Obama self-presentation

- 2008 presidential campaign is self-identification and symbolic representation of a new leader
- Jeffrey Alexander: during his first campaign, Obama told people a story of change
- David Remnick: *“In addition to his political views, what Obama proposed as the core of his candidacy was a self – a complex, cautious, intelligent, shrewd, young African-American man”*
[Remnick: 3-4]
- Identification of America goes through identification of Obama

Obama self-presentation

- March 4, 2007 – senator Obama speech at Brown Chapel, **Selma**, Alabama
- Selma – the capital of the “Black Belt”
- In 1965, MLK spoke at Brown Chapel and said that Selma had become a “symbol of bitter-end resistance to the civil-rights movement in the Deep South.”
- In 2007, Obama addressed a race issue structuring his speech as a Sunday sermon

Obama self-presentation

- Obama considers a city where he speaks as part of American identity (as well as a village, a place, a county, a state and the country)
- In Selma, Obama appeals to black religious authorities and to MLK
- The bridge in Selma is a metonymic symbol of the famous Black rally that ended up with mass arrests
- For Obama the bridge in Selma is a metaphorical symbol of himself and his generation: he himself strived to become a bridge for all Americans
- *“In Selma, Obama prepared to nominate himself as the inheritor of the most painful of all American struggles, the struggle of race: not race as invoked by his predecessors... Obama would make his biracial ancestry a metaphor for his ambition to create a broad coalition to support, to rally Americans behind a narrative of moral and political progress” [Remnick:4]*

Obama self-presentation

That bridge outside was crossed by blacks and whites, northerners and southerners, teenagers and children, the beloved community of God's children, they wanted to take those steps together, but it was left to the Joshuas to finish the journey Moses had begun and today we're called to be the Joshuas of our time, to be the generation that finds our way across this river

Obama rhetoric

Selma speech – religious discourse prevails over political one

“Obama could change styles without relinquishing his genuineness... Obama is multilingual, a shape-shifter... Like the child of immigrants who can speak one language at home, another at school, and another with his friends – and still be himself – Obama crafted his speech to fit the moment. It was a skill that had taken years to develop”

[Remnick: 18]

Obama self-presentation

- "A More Perfect Union", 2008, Constitution Center, **Philadelphia**, Pennsylvania
- **Rhetoric of parable** .Obama narrative discourse – presenting well-known as new:

*Two hundred and twenty one years ago, in **a** hall that still stands across the street, **a** group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots who had traveled across **an** ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at **a** Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787.*

Obama self-presentation

- Both in Selma and Philadelphia Obama addresses the race issue
- In Philadelphia Obama changes the accent from religion to politics and from MLK to the Declaration of Independence
- A city where Obama speaks gives a “frame” for the topic. It is a *topos* uniting the speaker and the audience

Obama self-presentation

- Obama about his father: he “*leapfrogged from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century in just a few years. He went from being a goat herder in a small **village** in Africa to getting a scholarship to the **University** of Hawaii to going to **Harvard**” [Remnick 34]*
- For Obama as a new political and rhetorical leader, self-identification was the key point: *What do I belong to?*

OBAMA SELF-PRESENTATION

- Obama's family is multiconfessional, multiracial, multilingual and multicontinental
- *“As a politician, Obama would make use of that family, asking voters to imagine it – and him – as a metaphor for American diversity”*
[Remnick: 69]
- During his first campaign, Obama presented himself as a leader of a union of diverse but equal people

OBAMA SELF-REPRESENTATION: YES, WE CAN

- Remarks in Washington, DC: "Changing the Odds for Urban America", July 18, 2007. Obama addresses the issue of poverty
- In biography of Obama, which is being actualized during the 2008 campaign, CITY has a set of connotations:
 1. Education and progress (Honolulu, Columbia, Harvard)
 2. Active political life (Chicago)
 3. Diversity, social problems (Chicago etc.)
 4. Electoral support (Des Moines etc.)

OBAMA REFRAMING – SECOND CAMPAIGN

- G. Lakoff, “Don’t think of an elephant” – politicians reframe the agenda for the electorate
- The Second campaign of Obama – “the narrative of hope” [Alexander]
- He doesn’t tell stories about himself and his biography anymore. Instead, he speaks about strong and weak points of his first term and reminds of basic values he had declared (narrative of nostalgia and hope)

OBAMA REFRAMING – SECOND CAMPAIGN

- **Des-Moines**, Iowa, November 5 2012, the day before final voting

*I've come back to Iowa one more time to ask for your vote. (Applause.) I came back to ask you to help us finish what we've started. (Applause.) **Because this is where our movement for change began.** (Applause.) Right here. Right here.*

***Right behind these bleachers is the building that was home to our Iowa headquarters in 2008.** (Applause.) I was just inside, and it brought back a whole lot of memories. This was where some of the first young people who joined our campaign set up shop, willing to work for little pay and less sleep because they believed that people who love their country can change it.*

- **'WE STILL CAN'**

OBAMA REFRAMING – SECOND CAMPAIGN

- Obama inaugural address, **Washington**, January 21, 2013

*What makes us exceptional -- what makes us American -- is our allegiance to **an idea articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago:***

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

OBAMA REFRAMING – SECOND CAMPAIGN

- *We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths -- that all of us are created equal -- is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through **Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall**; just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great Mall, to hear **a preacher** say that we cannot walk alone; to hear **a King** proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth. (Applause.)*

OBAMA REFRAMING – SECOND CAMPAIGN

**Obama rhetoric devices – the ‘backstage’ for
introducing the concept CITY**

- Allusions and quotations
- The rule of three
- Metaphors
- Alliterations
- Refrains
- Technique of telling parables

OBAMA REFRAMING – SECOND CAMPAIGN

‘Seneca Falls, Selma and Stonewall’

- **Seneca Falls** – the town in New York state, the site of the first women’s-rights convention (1848)
- **Selma** – the Alabama city where police brutally attacked peaceful civil-rights marchers (1965)
- **Stonewall** – the Greenwich Village bar, NYC, where riotous resistance to a police raid gave birth to the modern gay-rights movement (1969)

OBAMA REFRAMING – SECOND CAMPAIGN

- Names of cities and places play a key role in Obama narrative discourse
- Concept CITY helps Obama actualize the concrete topic and build the bridge between Americans
- Concept CITY helps the audience to get through the beautiful rhetorical ‘packing’
- During Obama’s first campaign, concept CITY helped him define his identity
- During Obama’s second campaign, concept CITY helped him evoke best memories of the electorate

LITERATURE

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