

Read “The Political Order” at <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/living/11.pdf> and “Pragmatism” at <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/living/philosophy/14.pdf> . Stating carefully your criteria, evaluate President Obama’s philosophy as described in the following excerpt of a *New York Times* essay. Why do you think that “elite” is often used pejoratively today?

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In Writings of Obama, a Philosophy Is Unearthed

By PATRICIA COHEN

When the Harvard historian James T. Kloppenberg decided to write about the influences that shaped **President Obama’s** view of the world, he interviewed the president’s former professors and classmates, combed through his books, essays, and speeches, and even read every article published during the three years Mr. Obama was involved with the Harvard Law Review (“a superb cure for insomnia,” Mr. Kloppenberg said). What he did not do was speak to President Obama.

“He would have had to deny every word,” Mr. Kloppenberg said with a smile. The reason, he explained, is his conclusion that President Obama is a true intellectual — a word that is frequently considered an epithet among populists with a robust suspicion of Ivy League elites.

In New York City last week to give a standing-room-only lecture about his forthcoming intellectual biography, “Reading Obama: Dreams, Hopes, and the American Political Tradition,” Mr. Kloppenberg explained that he sees Mr. Obama as a kind of philosopher president, a rare breed that can be found only a handful of times in American history.

“There’s John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and John Quincy Adams, then Abraham Lincoln and in the 20th century just Woodrow Wilson,” he said.

To Mr. Kloppenberg the philosophy that has guided President Obama most consistently is pragmatism, a uniquely American system of thought developed at the end of the 19th century by William James, John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce. It is a philosophy that grew up after Darwin published his theory of evolution and the Civil War reached its bloody end. More and more people were coming to believe that chance rather than providence guided human affairs, and that dogged certainty led to violence.

Pragmatism maintains that people are constantly devising and updating ideas to navigate the world in which they live; it embraces open-minded experimentation and continuing debate. “It is a philosophy for skeptics, not true believers,” Mr. Kloppenberg said.

Those who heard Mr. Kloppenberg present his argument at a conference on intellectual history at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center responded with prolonged applause. “The way he traced Obama’s intellectual influences was fascinating for us, given that Obama’s academic background seems so similar to ours,” said Andrew Hartman, a historian at Illinois State University who helped organize the conference.

Mr. Kloppenberg's interest in the education of Barack Obama began from a distance. He spent 2008, the election year, at the University of Cambridge in England and found himself in lecture halls and at dinner tables trying to explain who this man was.

Race, temperament and family history are all crucial to understanding the White House's current occupant, but Mr. Kloppenberg said he chose to focus on one slice of the president's makeup: his ideas.

In the professor's analysis the president's worldview is the product of the country's long history of extending democracy to disenfranchised groups, as well as the specific ideological upheavals that struck campuses in the 1980s and 1990s. He mentions, for example, that Mr. Obama was at Harvard during "the greatest intellectual ferment in law schools in the 20th century," when competing theories about race, feminism, realism and constitutional original intent were all battling for ground.

Mr. Obama was ultimately drawn to a cluster of ideas known as civic republicanism or deliberative democracy, Mr. Kloppenberg argues in the book, which Princeton University Press will publish on Sunday. In this view the founding fathers cared as much about continuing a discussion over how to advance the common good as they did about ensuring freedom.

Taking his cue from Madison, Mr. Obama writes in his 2006 book "The Audacity of Hope" that the constitutional framework is "designed to force us into a conversation," that it offers "a way by which we argue about our future." This notion of a living document is directly at odds with the conception of Justice Antonin Scalia of the Supreme Court, who has spoken of "the good, old dead Constitution."

Mr. Kloppenberg compiled a long list of people who he said helped shape Mr. Obama's thinking and writing, including Weber and Nietzsche, Thoreau and Emerson, Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison. Contemporary scholars like the historian Gordon Wood, the philosophers John Rawls and Hilary Putnam, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz and the legal theorists Martha Minow and Cass Sunstein (who is now working at the White House) also have a place.

Despite the detailed examination, Mr. Kloppenberg concedes that President Obama remains something of a mystery.

"To critics on the left he seems a tragic failure, a man with so much potential who has not fulfilled the promise of change that partisans predicted for his presidency," he said. "To the right he is a frightening success, a man who has transformed the federal government and ruined the economy."

He finds both assessments flawed. Conservatives who argue that Mr. Obama is a socialist or an anti-colonialist (as Dinesh D'Souza does in his book "The Roots of Obama's Rage") are far off the mark, he said.

"Adams and Jefferson were the only anti-colonialists whom Obama has been affected by," he told the audience in New York. "He has a profound love of America."

And his opposition to inequality stems from Puritan preachers and the social gospel rather than socialism.

As for liberal critics, Mr. Kloppenberg took pains to differentiate the president's philosophical pragmatism, which assumes that change emerges over decades, from the kind of "vulgar pragmatism" practiced by politicians looking only for expedient compromise. (He gave former President Bill Clinton's strategy of "triangulation" as an example.)

Not all of the disappointed liberals who attended the lecture in New York were convinced that that distinction can be made so easily. T. J. Jackson Lears, a historian at Rutgers University, wrote in an e-mail that by "showing that Obama comes out of a tradition of philosophical pragmatism, he actually provided a basis for criticizing Obama's slide into vulgar pragmatism."

And despite Mr. Kloppenberg's focus on the president's intellectual evolution, most listeners wanted to talk about his political record.

"There seemed to be skepticism regarding whether Obama's intellectual background actually translated into policies that the mostly left-leaning audience could get behind," Mr. Hartman said. "Several audience members, myself included, probably view Obama the president as a centrist like Clinton rather than a progressive intellectual as painted by Kloppenberg."