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Obama and the Politics of Crowds

The masses greeting the candidate on the trail are a sign of great unease.

By [FOUAD AJAMI](#)

There is something odd -- and dare I say novel -- in American politics about the crowds that have been greeting Barack Obama on his campaign trail. Hitherto, crowds have not been a prominent feature of American politics. We associate them with the temper of Third World societies. We think of places like Argentina and Egypt and Iran, of multitudes brought together by their zeal for a Peron or a Nasser or a Khomeini. In these kinds of societies, the crowd comes forth to affirm its faith in a redeemer: a man who would set the world right.

As the late Nobel laureate Elias Canetti observes in his great book, "Crowds and Power" (first published in 1960), the crowd is based on an illusion of equality: Its quest is for that moment when "distinctions are thrown off and all become equal. It is for the sake of this blessed moment, when no one is greater or better than another, that people become a crowd." These crowds, in the tens of thousands, who have been turning out for the Democratic standard-bearer in St. Louis and Denver and Portland, are a measure of American distress.

On the face of it, there is nothing overwhelmingly stirring about Sen. Obama. There is a cerebral quality to him, and an air of detachment. He has eloquence, but within bounds. After nearly two years on the trail, the audience can pretty much anticipate and recite his lines. The political genius of the man is that he is a blank slate. The devotees can project onto him what they wish. The coalition that has propelled his quest -- African-Americans and affluent white liberals -- has no economic coherence. But for the moment, there is the illusion of a common undertaking -- Canetti's feeling of equality within the crowd. The day after, the crowd will of course discover its own fissures. The affluent will have to pay for the programs promised the poor. The redistribution agenda that runs through Mr. Obama's vision is anathema to the Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and the hedge-fund managers now smitten with him. Their ethos is one of competition and the justice of the rewards that come with risk and effort. All this is shelved, as the devotees sustain the candidacy of a man whose public career has been a steady advocacy of reining in the market and organizing those who believe in entitlement and redistribution.

A creature of universities and churches and nonprofit institutions, the Illinois senator, with the blessing and acquiescence of his upscale supporters, has glided

past these hard distinctions. On the face of it, it must be surmised that his affluent devotees are ready to foot the bill for the new order, or are convinced that after victory the old ways will endure, and that Mr. Obama will govern from the center. Ambiguity has been a powerful weapon of this gifted candidate: He has been different things to different people, and he was under no obligation to tell this coalition of a thousand discontents, and a thousand visions, the details of his political programs: redistribution for the poor, postracial absolution and "modernity" for the upper end of the scale.

It was no accident that the white working class was the last segment of the population to sign up for the Obama journey. Their hesitancy was not about race. They were men and women of practicality; they distrusted oratory, they could see through the falseness of the solidarity offered by this campaign. They did not have much, but believed in the legitimacy of what little they had acquired. They valued work and its rewards. They knew and heard of staggering wealth made by the Masters of the Universe, but held onto their faith in the outcomes that economic life decreed. The economic hurricane that struck America some weeks ago shook them to the core. They now seek protection, the shelter of the state, and the promise of social repair. The bonuses of the wizards who ran the great corporate entities had not bothered them. It was the spectacle of the work of the wizards melting before our eyes that unsettled them.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the late Democratic senator from New York, once set the difference between American capitalism and the older European version by observing that America was the party of liberty, whereas Europe was the party of equality. Just in the nick of time for the Obama candidacy, the American faith in liberty began to crack. The preachers of America's decline in the global pecking order had added to the panic. Our best days were behind us, the declinists prophesied. The sun was setting on our imperium, and rising in other lands.

A younger man, "cool" and collected, carrying within his own biography the strands of the world beyond America's shores, was put forth as a herald of the change upon us. The crowd would risk the experiment. There was grudge and a desire for retribution in the crowd to begin with. Akin to the passions that have shaped and driven highly polarized societies, this election has at its core a desire to settle the unfinished account of the presidential election eight years ago. George W. Bush's presidency remained, for his countless critics and detractors, a tale of usurpation. He had gotten what was not his due; more galling still, he had been bold and unabashed, and taken his time at the helm as an opportunity to assert an ambitious doctrine of American power abroad. He had waged a war of choice in Iraq.

This election is the rematch that John Kerry had not delivered on. In the fashion of the crowd that seeks and sees the justice of retribution, Mr. Obama's supporters have been willing to overlook his means. So a candidate pledged to good government and to ending the role of money in our political life opts out of public financing of presidential campaigns. What of it? The end justifies the means.

Save in times of national peril, Americans have been sober, really minimalist, in

what they expected out of national elections, out of politics itself. The outcomes that mattered were decided in the push and pull of daily life, by the inventors and the entrepreneurs, and the captains of industry and finance. To be sure, there was a measure of willfulness in this national vision, for politics and wars guided the destiny of this republic. But that American sobriety and skepticism about politics -- and leaders -- set this republic apart from political cultures that saw redemption lurking around every corner.

My boyhood, and the Arab political culture I have been chronicling for well over three decades, are anchored in the Arab world. And the tragedy of Arab political culture has been the unending expectation of the crowd -- the street, we call it -- in the redeemer who will put an end to the decline, who will restore faded splendor and greatness. When I came into my own, in the late 1950s and '60s, those hopes were invested in the Egyptian Gamal Abdul Nasser. He faltered, and broke the hearts of generations of Arabs. But the faith in the Awaited One lives on, and it would forever circle the Arab world looking for the next redeemer.

America is a different land, for me exceptional in all the ways that matter. In recent days, those vast Obama crowds, though, have recalled for me the politics of charisma that wrecked Arab and Muslim societies. A leader does not have to say much, or be much. The crowd is left to its most powerful possession -- its imagination.

From Elias Canetti again: "But the crowd, as such, disintegrates. It has a presentiment of this and fears it. . . . Only the growth of the crowd prevents those who belong to it from creeping back under their private burdens."

The morning after the election, the disappointment will begin to settle upon the Obama crowd. Defeat -- by now unthinkable to the devotees -- will bring heartbreak. Victory will steadily deliver the sobering verdict that our troubles won't be solved by a leader's magic.

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