

Martin A. Parlett. *Demonizing a President: The “Foreignization” of Barack Obama.* Denver, CO: Praeger, 2014. ix, 241 pp. (Hardcover, \$48).

In 2008 and once again in 2012, Barack Obama rose to the United States Presidency on a strategic and arguably successful effort to symbolize the promise and emergence of a post-racial society that in all reality still remains elusive. Studies have illustrated the resonance of this strategy with the “white racial frame” (Moore and Bell, 2010) and “colorblind racial ideology” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) and revealed that endorsing Obama allows whites to feel less guilty about laissez-faire racism (Efron, Cameron and Monin, 2009) and that his election reduced whites’ perception of America’s need for progressive social reforms (Kaiser, et al., 2009). However, the symbolic meaning of Obama’s election has become interweaved within not only covert racist frames and ideologies among liberals but also overt ones among conservatives. Social and political analysts are now beginning to study how Obama has also come to signify a negative notion of “difference,” due to the fact of his distinction from hegemonic conceptualizations of American identity in the minds of many Americans (cf. Hughey, 2012; Hughey and Parks, 2014). Within the context of this sociopolitical and cultural paradox, Martin A. Parlett’s *Demonizing a President: The “Foreignization” of Barack Obama* exposes and analyzes the various discursive frames that political opponents, media pundits, and conservative activists have deployed in order to malign and “foreignize” President Barack Obama.

Parlett, a British citizen and former campaigner for Obama, was inspired to write the book in response to the racially charged negative and violent reactions he received whilst campaigning door-to-door for candidate Obama during the 2008 election. Parlett writes that he was “surprised at the regularity of these underground experiences of intense prejudice and negative identity politics” (p. xi) which have only become more widespread, overt, and pronounced in the successive years after Obama’s first election. As suggested by this vignette, the book does little to substantively defend or analyze Obama’s actual political stances or policy choices but rather tasks itself with understanding the symbolic politics surrounding Obama as a cultural lightning rod attracting both old and new narratives and tropes of in/out social group distinctions.

Demonizing a President attempts to fulfill two critical functions. First, through a pointed and sound response, the book serves as an effort at debunking the explosion of polemical works from the right. This discourse presents a litany of dubious claims about Obama’s history, biography, and intentions in the absence of substantive political critiques. Rather than simply engage with these claims in a purely fact-checking and evidential manner, Parlett exposes the underlying sociopolitical mechanisms that motivate the production of such claims and enable them to resonate with particular political audiences. Second, and perhaps more interesting to social and political scientists, the text represents an ideal case study in political rhetoric and the mobilization of discourse. Language can, when framed properly, activate deep-seated cultural schemas of belonging, security, and moral value. In order to achieve these ends, Parlett places the discursive processes of denigration to Obama’s character within the context of the notion of “Othering” culled from continental philosophy and given empirical substance by sociological and cognitive research.

Under this overarching umbrella of Obama as the “Other,” the book breaks down into themes that typologize the rhetorical attacks and malignant images lobbed at President Obama by his detractors: the foreigner, the black racial stereotype, the Islamic terrorist, and the communist dictator. The manufactured crisis perpetuated by the “birther” movement is the first targeted in Parlett’s analysis, which draws heavily upon and makes great use of the history and extant literature on the naturalization of American citizenship as whiteness. Next, he examines the symbolic politics formed around Obama’s “blackness”—from his mobilization of black identity to the regressive racial attacks emitted from those on the right utilizing black stereotypes to frame Obama as “angry, lazy, and stupid.” He then examines Obama’s “religious othering” (126) through the construction of an image of the president as a closeted Muslim extremist masquerading as a Christian, the nightmare of the American right’s collective post-9/11 religious and geopolitical consciousness. The fourth and final trope analyzed in the book is the McCarthyesque rhetoric surrounding Obama’s family background, political ideology, and perceived policy stratagem. The book concludes with a chapter on the implications of emergent issues such as how new media affects contemporary political rhetoric and explores how Obama has successfully deployed his own symbolic and discursive techniques to maintain political power and legitimation.

Overall, *Demonizing a President* provides a lucid and well-crafted investigation of the underside of the heightened political and rhetorical phenomena surrounding America’s first nonwhite President. More importantly, the book’s philosophical and sociopolitical elucidation of “Othering” and final chapter opens up space and provides tools for future theorizing and research about political discourse articulated through emergent avenues such as Web 2.0 communication as sites of collective identity construction. Finally, the book’s topic remains incredibly salient as the polarization of political rhetoric around Obama has arguably prevented reasoned and policy based discussions of Obama’s presidency that, as noted by Bonilla-Silva (2010) and Hughey and Parks (2014), is a particularly troubling phenomena for progressives in light of his arguably center-right positions on many social, foreign policy, and economic issues.

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