

OBAMA AND THE END OF THE AMERICAN DREAM



# Obama and The End of the American Dream

*Essays in Political and Economic Philosophy*

*By*

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Postscript by Tina Besley



SENSE PUBLISHERS  
ROTTERDAM / BOSTON / TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-94-6091-769-1 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-94-6091-770-7 (hardback)  
ISBN 978-94-6091-771-4 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,  
P.O. Box 21858, 3001 AW Rotterdam, The Netherlands  
<https://www.sensepublishers.com>

*Printed on acid-free paper*

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## AMERICAN DREAM IN IMAGES

The American Dream that crystallized around James Truslow Adams' *The epic of America* originally formulated in the early 1930s and conditioned by a decade of complexity and contradiction, of big government projects, intense nationalism, the definition of the American way, and a distinctive collection of American icons – Mickey Mouse, Popeye, the rise of the musical comedy of Broadway, the emergence of the jukebox<sup>1</sup> – also has a visual and image history. Indeed, Adam's dream of opportunity for each according to ability or achievement shaped against the old class culture of Europe emphasizes a vision of social order in which each person can succeed despite their social origins.

The history of the American Dream lends itself to being “narrated” through a sequence of images more so than most histories because America is the home of the moving image . . . images is everything; it defines a spectacular culture based on TV, on film – “movies” – and increasingly on the video as it has emerged in the age of YouTube. Image creation, collection, dissemination and management is at the heart of American commerce and culture branding products and companies, ubiquitous advertising that blurs reality and fantasy, and that creates both “the news” and the home theatre.

In considering a selection of images that should embellish this essay I focused on a number of clearly defined sets: the *national symbols* represented in “Old Glory” (the American flag), the Statue of Liberty, the White House and the US Treasury building; the civil rights movements with historic photos of the march on Washington in 1963, photos on Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Baines Johnson, “I have a dream” speech, and a sequence of photos documenting the assassination of Martin Luther King at the Lorraine motel in Memphis where he was shot and later was turned into a civil rights museum; a series of photos that focus on housing and home-life and later the sub-prime housing crisis triggering the massive recession in 2007, and the automobile so much a part of America; there are also a deliberate linking of Adam's *The epic of America* and Obama's *The audacity of hope*, as well as photos of Obama remarkable ascendancy to power; finally there are some pictures that indicate the fact that the dream has been shattered.

These image sets are treated largely but not exclusively in consecutive sequence. Had this been a larger book I would have included other sets from Hollywood, the “dream factory,” the comic book culture, the architecture, galleries

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and museums, city-scapes and motorway systems, the massive grand plains and agro-businesses that dominate the uninhabited rural areas, the landmarks and beauty of so much natural landscape.

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The University of Waikato, August 28, 2011

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See "America in the 1930s" at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/front.html>.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most of these essays appeared in one form or other in my “column” in the journal *Policy Futures in Education* under the banner “Obama’s America” during his first term of office and while I was employed as a professor at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign). These essays were essentially short pieces that made observations on the contemporary political context and use an event to inquire more deeply into the basis of Obama’s presidency and the crises he faced. They are also largely now my parting comment on the six years that I was domiciled in the town of Urbana-Champaign while working at the University of Illinois. I was encouraged by my colleagues and students to make these pieces more widely available. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues and students at Illinois for their encouragement and comments. I would also like to thank Ruth Fearnley at the University of Waikato for reading and proofing the manuscript and Paul Cowan for help with mastering the images. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Tina Besley for the Postscript and Peter de Liefde and Bernice Kelly for the opportunity to publish this work and for the preparation of the book.

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25 April 2012