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Barack Obama: American Historian

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Barack Obama: American Historian. By Steven Sarson. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018)

Steven Sarson's work presents Barack Obama as a narrative historian whose genius is his ability to synthesize many individual stories and events into a larger mosaic of national social and political progress. Of course, this weaving together of many racial, ethnic, religious and ideological strands into a unified whole begins with Obama's own multi-cultural personal history. His skill as both a historian and a politician is his ability to relate his own story to those that hear his speeches and read his books.

The former president believes the Founders' original intent was evolutionary (Sarson labels Obama a "radical Whig") and they intended that we adapt their words to our world. From the nation's birth at the Declaration of Independence to his own inauguration, the moral imperative or "creed" embodied in the Declaration's words has driven our constant struggle to become "a more perfect union." Making the ideal and the reality match, says Sarson, means Obama's history is only rarely concerned with the specific and multiple causes of individual events. By focusing on positive outcomes rather than the more complicated process, he is able to avoid the details of slavery and segregation that might offend those Americans not ready to confront the fullness of American history.

Obama's conflating the story of the Pilgrims and the Puritans with the "scholars and farmers" who founded the nation over 150 years later, allows him to ignore the religious intolerance of the former while praising the separation of church and state by the latter. Similarly, by emphasizing the religious mythology of the founding,

Obama ignores the economic motives of the earliest settlers at Jamestown and the slavery that followed. “The absence of an Obamian ‘critical theory of capitalism,’ states Sarson, “obscures the extent to which economic imperatives on the one hand and political ideas about ‘property’ and ‘liberty’ exist in tension with each other both in the past and in the present (p.8).”

Sarson’s work presents Obama as a philosophical pragmatist who applies his formidable skills as a speaker and writer to problem solving. For Obama, however, the problem is not in the system but in the actions of individuals. This perspective leads Obama to view the positions of others such as Black nationalists or evangelicals as ideological or theological and even accept the need for prophets and zealots as agents of change. He does not, however, see his own belief in the connection between private property and liberty as an ideological position.

Sarson has given us a work that fills in the silences of Obama’s American history. At times, Obama disappears for long stretches as the author discusses the “Marshall Trilogy” of Native American Supreme Court cases or the details of the Constitutional Convention, however, the end product is a worthy and original addition to the Obama literature.

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