

Introduction

Barack Obama is now in the second half of his term as president of the United States. A good time, perhaps, to stand back and take stock of his presidency. Articles in this issue of World Socialist Review offer a range of socialist perspectives on Obama's life and political career and examine the policy of his administration in various areas – health insurance reform, the economy, the environment, the space program, Afghanistan. Other articles place Obama within the context of an American political system that in many ways remains undemocratic and within the broader context of a world economic system based on profit – the wasteful, cruel, and crisis-ridden system that we call capitalism.

We have nothing against Obama personally. We do not accuse him of going into politics solely in pursuit of fame and fortune. On the contrary, he seems to have started out with the best of intentions, hoping that one day he might be able to do something to make the world a better place. Our aim is to show how the capitalist class, who exercise real power in our society, corrupt and coopt well-intentioned young people like Obama. To show how capitalism works to frustrate and corrode even the noblest aspirations.

We also invite you, the reader, to ponder the narrow limits of the “politics of the lesser evil.” We invite you to consider whether it might not in fact be more realistic to “demand the impossible” – or, rather, what is wrongly supposed to be impossible. That is, a new social system based on human needs and democratic control of the means of life.

World Socialist Party of the United States
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The Meaning of the U.S. Midterm Election Results

For Republican politicians and the corporate media, the U.S. midterm election results are supposedly evidence of “a massive conservative trend sweeping the nation.”¹ Proclaiming the victory of his party on election night, top House Republican John Boehner declared that “the American people have sent President Barack Obama a message through the ballot box to change course” – and he was not calling on Obama to steer further to the left.

There has clearly been a significant decline in public support for Obama. However, there is no massive conservative trend in national opinion. The real picture is more uncertain and more complex.

The majority did not vote

One point will suffice to deflate the overblown rhetoric. The American people have sent no one a message through the ballot box to do anything, for the simple reason that the majority of the American people – 58.5%, to be more precise – did not vote.

Well, nothing unusual about that. Voter turnout in the United States is low. In fact, a turnout of 41.5% is rather above average for midterm elections: it usually lies between 30% and 40%. Turnout in presidential elections, and in congressional elections held in the same year as presidential elections, is considerably higher, in the 50-60% range, though this is still low by international standards. In the 2008 congressional elections 57% voted.²

How likely people are to vote depends heavily on such factors as age and income. People with higher incomes are more likely to vote than the poor, while the elderly are more likely to vote than those of working age. Moreover, these differences are especially wide when overall turnout is very low. People with higher incomes and the elderly vote disproportionately for the Republicans. That is why the Republicans tend to do better in midterm elections than in presidential election years, even when there is no real shift in public opinion.

In the November elections Republican candidates won 54% of the total vote. It is equally true to say, taking turnout into account, that slightly over a fifth of Americans (22%) voted for Republicans and slightly under a fifth (19%) for Democrats. This hardly represents a groundswell in public support for the Republicans. Due to the way the electoral system works, the votes of just 3% of citizens made all the difference between a Democratic and a Republican landslide. It is also striking that a lower proportion of Americans voted Republican in 2010 than in 2008 (25%).

“Progressive” Democrats did well

The “Tea Party” movement has swept many new Christian fundamentalist and other extremist Republicans into Congress. This would seem to support the thesis of a massive conservative trend. At the same time, however, there has been a marked shift in the composition of congressional Democrats that points in a different direction.

The Democrats in Congress are divided into several groups. To simplify matters, let us compare the relative positions of the groups furthest to the “right” and “left”—the “Blue Dogs” and the Progressive Caucus. The elections have reduced the number of Blue Dogs in the House of Representatives by over half, from 54 to 26. In contrast, the number of “progressive” Democrats has fallen only slightly, from 79 to 75. As a proportion of all Democrats in the House, the Blue Dogs have fallen from 22% to 14% while the progressives have risen from 32% to 40%.³

So while the Democrats as a whole suffered a major setback in the elections, many if not all “progressive” Democrats did quite well. To take one important example, although the Democratic Party lost its traditional hold on the once industrial but now largely deindustrialized Midwest, with dozens of incumbent Democrats losing their seats, in Ohio’s 10th Congressional District the “progressive” former presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich defeated his Republican opponent by the safe margin of 53% to 44%. By distancing themselves from Obama, many “progressive” Democrats were apparently able to capture a share of the protest vote of Americans who had backed Obama in the presidential elections but were now disappointed in him.

The electoral successes of “progressive” Democrats give socialists some grounds for hope. That is not because the “progressives” are socialists or even close to being socialists: their reform program basically aims to make the U.S. more competitive in the context of world capitalism, whose continued existence it assumes. Nevertheless, they have shown that it is possible to withstand the hostility of the corporate media and

The Meaning of the U.S. Midterm Election Results

find other ways to establish and maintain contact with ordinary people. If they can do it, socialists can too.

Breakup of the two-party system?

Thus, the trend revealed by the election results is not clearly conservative in nature. The change in the relative strength of the Democratic and Republican Parties is less significant than it appears. But there has been a further strengthening in the position of the extreme “right” within the Republican Party and of the “extreme left” (by the standards of U.S. politics) within the Democratic Party. In other words, American public opinion is undergoing a process of polarization.

This raises the question of the future shape of the American party system. The two-party system is deeply entrenched, but under extreme stress its breakup is surely conceivable. Both the Democratic and the Republican Party are now more deeply divided than ever before. Should one or both of them split apart over the next few years, the result could be a more varied and changeable political landscape with three, four, or even more large national parties.⁴ The political process might then no longer be under such tight corporate control, placing socialists in a somewhat less constraining political environment.

Stefan

Notes

[1] Reese Erlich, therealnews.com/t2

[2] Figures taken from the site elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm

[3] democracynow.org/2010/11/4/as_right_leaning_blue_dogs_lose

[4] See the speculations of the activist film maker Michael Moore at democracynow.org/2010/11/3/exclusive_filmaker_michael_moore_on_midterm

Can the Tea Party Save the American Dream?

The right-wing Tea Party movement is, according to some commentators, turning into a mass, “grassroots” movement and revolutionizing politics in America. Is it?

If the “lame-stream media,” to steal an appropriate phrase, is to be believed, then there has been a “massive,” indeed “historic,” change in the biggest economy and the most powerful country on the planet. The United States’ mid-term elections, held last month, midway between the four-yearly presidential elections, saw the biggest swing to the Republican Party for 72 years. The Republicans now hold a majority in the House of Representatives, and fell just short of control of the Senate, only four years after voters handed both chambers of the US Congress to the Democrats. A conservative revolution has swept the nation. At least, that’s the lame-stream view. But in truth, nothing much has changed.

The Republicans and the Democrats are essentially two wings of the same party – the Business Party – and there’s very little to choose between them. During election campaigns, significant policy differences are downplayed or ignored completely – largely because they don’t exist – and which wing wins depends on which has succeeded in attracting the most investment from sections of the capitalist class, spent the most money, and delivered the most effective PR/advertising campaign.

As for what voters themselves might be thinking, the election results don’t tell us all that much, as Stefan points out on our previous article. The truth is that most voters, and a disproportionate number of Democrat voters, stayed at home, and that the success of the more ‘progressive’ Democrats was at least as noteworthy as the success of the more-right-wing Republicans – in fact, a lower proportion of Americans voted Republican in 2010 than in 2008. In any case, as a result of the way the electoral system works, the votes of just 3 % of citizens make all the difference between a Democratic and a Republican landslide. So much for the rise of conservatism.

But perhaps the most interesting thing about the election, and the campaign leading up to it, was the growth of the so-called Tea Party movement. This is a network of hundreds of supposedly “anti-

Can the Tea Party Save the American Dream?

establishment" conservative groups across the US, which, if nothing else, energized the Republican Party and made the election campaign slightly more interesting. No one knows just how many Tea Partiers there are – it's not a single organization with a membership or leadership – but it has had a significant impact on American politics, if only because the lame-stream media has obligingly given it a voice and credibility.

The relatively lame performance of the Tea Partiers in the election would seem to draw into question the common claim that the Tea Party represents a significant popular force, with a mass 'grassroots' following. But last month more than half of Americans in a Rasmussen poll said they view the Tea Party favorably – that's despite the fact, or perhaps because of the fact, that the Tea Party has no manifesto, no clear policies, and no clearly expressed ideas about what it would do should it win power. Instead, the party makes its stand on reducing the deficit without specifying how, cutting taxes, "taking back" America from a supposedly corrupt "establishment", and abolishing vast swathes of government, including such evils as environmental protection legislation, subsidized healthcare for the poor and elderly, and unemployment benefit.

To the extent that this is a grassroots movement, then, it is a movement of people organizing against their economic interest. The reasons why this happens are many, not least of which is that people have been conned into it by a PR campaign funded by billionaire businessmen. But the Tea Party is also saying things – about the bankruptcy of the economy, about the rotteness of government and other institutions – that ordinary people are increasingly interested in hearing.

Why has the Tea Party risen to prominence now?

The context for the rise of the Tea Party is a profound and deep crisis – economic and ideological. Let's take the economic aspect first. It is certainly true, as apologists for capitalism will be quick to tell you, that capitalism has continued to be very good at creating massive amounts of wealth. But whose wealth? The wealth of the nation is now concentrated in fewer hands than it has been for 80 years, says Robert Reich, a professor of public policy at the University of California at Berkeley, and former secretary of labour under Bill Clinton (robertreich.org). Almost a quarter of total income generated in the United States is going to the top 1 per cent; and the top one-tenth of one per cent of Americans now rake in as much as the bottom 120 million. In 1973, chief executives were on average paid 26 times the median income. Now the

multiple is 300. That's what they mean when they say nothing can match capitalism for creating wealth.

At the other end of the scale things are getting pretty desperate. Wages for the majority of the population have stayed flat since 1973, while work hours and insecurity have increased. And that's for those "lucky" enough to have a job. America is facing "the worst jobs crisis in generations", says Andy Kroll in a report for TomDispatch.com (5 October), with the number of unemployed exploding by over 400 % – from 1.3 million in December 2007, when the recession began, to 6.8 million this June. As a result, 11 million borrowers – or nearly 23 % of all homeowners with a mortgage – now find themselves 'underwater', that is, owing more on their mortgages than their houses are worth. In June of this year, over 41 million Americans were relying on food stamps from the Federal government to feed themselves. That's an 18 per cent year on year increase. Thirty cents of every dollar in personal income now comes from some form of government support.

In short, capitalism is in its biggest crisis since the Great Depression. This means that wealth is returning to its "rightful owners", the capitalist class; the workers, meanwhile, must make do with austerity.

The American Dream

Meanwhile, the related ideological crisis is presenting itself as the "end of the American dream", or, as Edward Luce in the *Financial Times* (30 July) puts it, a crisis in the consciousness of the middle class. Lame-stream media commentators often have lots to say about the "middle class", but they will very rarely define what they mean by the term. This is very wise on their part, because it would quickly become obvious that the "middle class" includes just about everybody, which would make people think about just what it is they're supposed to be in the middle of. The "middle-class" couple Luce interviews for his article work as a "warehouse receiver" (he lugs stuff around a warehouse) and an "anaesthesia supply technician" (she makes sure nurses and doctors have the stuff they need) – surely working-class jobs by any definition. Hilariously, Luce cannot even bring himself to describe the woman's father – an uneducated miner – as working-class without wrapping scare quotes around the term. "Working-class" is clearly a taboo term – the working class is not supposed to exist.

Still, it's not a taboo socialists respect. As working-class people, with jobs, living in the richest country on the planet, and with a joint income about a third above the US median, Luce's interviewees could think themselves not too badly off, relatively speaking. They lived in a house

Can the Tea Party Save the American Dream?

on a nice, tree-lined street, never went hungry, and turned on the air-conditioning when it got too hot. Once upon a time, says Luce, "this was called the American Dream". Now, it's a different story. Their house is under threat of repossession, their son was kicked off his mother's health insurance and only put back on at crippling cost, and, as the couple say themselves, they are only ever "a pay cheque or two from the streets". Who isn't? We're all middle class now, after all. This "economic strangulation", as Luce puts it, began long before the recession – as we pointed out above, wages have been flat since 1973 – but is only now being really felt as the credit cards are cut up, jobs lost, and state spending on social services cut back.

But it's not just that things are bad. Americans are also losing confidence that things will get any better: a growing majority of parents do not think their children will end up better off than they are, for example. Another important ingredient in the American Dream has gone off. It is this growing majority of disaffected working-class people, who had been convinced that they were middle class and doing pretty well, who are looking for answers. And unless they look very hard indeed, beyond the lame-stream, the only answers they're hearing with any coherence at all are coming from the Tea Party.

The appeal of the Tea Party

It can't be denied that Tea Party ideas have some superficial appeal. The Tea Party was described by Ben McGrath in *The New Yorker* as a collection of, among other things, "Atlas Shruggers". No doubt McGrath could be confident that his American audience would understand what he meant by this. *Atlas Shrugged* is a novel by Ayn Rand and, according to an often-quoted American survey of readers, was ranked second only to the Bible as a book that had most influenced their lives. It was a tiny, unrepresentative and biased survey, but still, there's no doubt that the book provokes strong feelings among its readers and admirers and is a best-seller in the US – no small achievement given the book's length and the fact that it is explicitly a novel exploring abstract philosophical ideas. The strong feeling it provokes in most socialists is revulsion – it is a manifesto for unrestrained capitalism, proclaims the virtues of selfishness, and the characters we are supposed to look up to as models of human moral virtue are vile, self-serving monomaniacs and workaholics.

But it's not hard to see the appeal of Rand's ideas either. She is committed, at least in theory, to individual freedom, independence from all authority, and writes inspiring of human achievement – in Rand,

human life is not a pit of despair, but an exciting adventure, full of possibility. The best social and economic system for realizing human potential, according to Rand, is capitalism. But not really-existing capitalism – more a utopian vision of what a free market, laissez faire future might be like if only people acted rationally and according to their own interest, and the state got off people’s backs. Rand was interesting, but wrong. Marx’s *Capital* shows that capitalism – even when it is operating perfectly well, without corruption or unnecessary state interference – must necessarily produce misery and exploitation; and that the state, far from standing in the way of free markets, was an absolutely essential tool for creating and maintaining them.

The truth is that, whatever the appeal of the Tea Party or Ayn Rand to working-class people, the ideas are unlikely to have the desired impact for one good reason: the business elite and the capitalists, who Rand and the Tea Party hold up as models of human virtue, don’t like them either. As Lisa Lerer and John McCormick put it in a cover story in *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* (13 October), Tea Party ideas:

“... may sound like a corporate dream come true – as long as the corporation in question doesn't have international operations, rely on immigrant labour, see the value of national monetary policy, or find itself in need of a subsidy to boost exports or an emergency loan from the Fed to survive the worst recession in seven decades. Business leaders who favor education reform, immigration reform, or investment in infrastructure can likely say goodbye to those ideas for the short term as well.”

So there’s little danger of capitalists going too far in supporting “free market” or “laissez faire” capitalism – they understand their own business interests too well. The only remaining danger is that these ideas will continue to have a poisonous appeal for the working class, and to radical movements genuinely searching for answers to social problems. It’s up to socialists to provide better answers and get them out there. Can the Tea Party save the American Dream? Probably not. Socialists certainly hope not. The American Dream has always been just that – a dream. Now, though, the dream is turning into a nightmare. It’s time to wake up.

Stuart Watkins

from *Socialist Standard*, Dec. 2010

Disillusioned – But Not Half Disillusioned Enough!

Disillusioned – But Not Half Disillusioned Enough!

The once fervent supporters of Barack Obama say that they are more and more “disillusioned” with his politics. And the word *should* be apt since so many of them were intoxicated by the illusion that one single politician could transform a rotten social system. It seems, though, that many of those who describe themselves as disillusioned are accusing Obama of breaking his promises, rather than blaming themselves for falling prey to a naïve illusion.

This seems a bit unfair to Obama, who made no secret during his campaign of his “moderate” political outlook. A central theme of his campaign, in fact, was the need for bipartisanship to counter the trend towards politics becoming too “ideological.” Those who now criticize Obama for being yet another spineless Democrat were not paying adequate attention to the statements he made during the campaign. Obama made no secret two years ago of his deeply-held principle of *never sticking to any principle*. He has never claimed to be anything but a “pragmatist,” which is a nicer way of saying “opportunist.”

There was, of course, that promise Obama made about bringing about some sort of *change*, but isn’t it a bit unfair to hold him to such a sweeping and vague promise? And things *have* changed – just not for the better. Over the past two years, millions of Americans have experienced the dramatic change of losing their job or home (or both).

Principled spinelessness

Those painful, negative changes might be easier for some to stomach if Obama had cracked down on Wall Street or ended the senseless wars in the Middle East. But instead he has left many Bush Administration policies intact; and even the few important policy changes that Obama has implemented have been tainted with his “principled spinelessness” (most notably, his healthcare reform that leaves the parasitic insurance companies in place and even presents them with opportunities for expansion).

Yet here again Obama has more or less been true to the positions he held prior to the presidential election. Even if we go back a bit further, to his book *The Audacity of Hope*, published in 2006, we see that he proudly displayed his essentially “conservative” politics. Far from making promises to left-wing Democrats or posing as a progressive, Obama was careful to define himself as a political pragmatist, ready and willing to work with the Republicans.

Moreover, one of Obama’s traits, as the book reveals, is a concern to not be caught in outright lies. He rarely resorts to statements that directly invert the truth in the style of Bush’s “We don’t torture” or Nixon’s “I am not a crook.” Rather, Obama likes to underscore the complexity of reality and the need for pragmatic solutions.

A case of wishful thinking

The idea that President Obama has broken his promises can only seem valid to those who – against all the evidence he provided – fashioned an image of him as the country’s progressive saviour. These are the people who helped make *The Audacity of Hope* a bestseller, but one can’t help wondering if they got past the first few pages. Anyone who managed to at least read the prologue would have encountered the following passage, which might have given them pause for thought:

I am new enough on the national political scene that I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views. As such, I am bound to disappoint some, if not all, of them.

Had his readers reflected a bit on this insight, they might have questioned whether the “Obama as saviour” storyline was not simply a case of wishful thinking. But perhaps that is like asking someone in love to consider the possibility that the object of their love is not quite perfect.

Obama’s warning in the prologue might be easy to overlook, but it is followed by countless examples throughout the book where he lays out quite clearly his conservative credentials and deep-rooted affection for the capitalist system, including a prominent passage in that same prologue where he informs the reader that (contrary to what those at Fox News might have believed) not an ounce of “socialism” will be found in

Disillusioned – But Not Half Disillusioned Enough!

the subsequent pages:

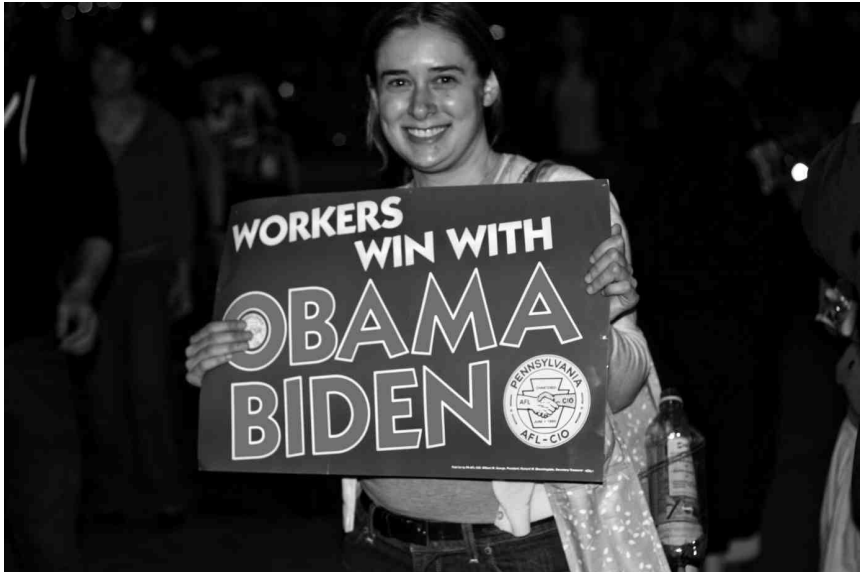
I believe in the free market, competition, and entrepreneurship, and think no small number of government programs don't work as advertised... I think America has more often been a force for good than for ill in the world; I carry few illusions about our enemies, and revere the courage and competence of our military... I think much of what ails the inner city involves a breakdown in culture that will not be cured by money alone, and that our values and spiritual life matter at least as much as our GDP.

Obama “thinks” a lot of things in the book, and surprisingly few of his thoughts are in harmony with the views of his leftwing supporters, who worked so hard to get him elected.

A foreign policy dove?

Take his views on foreign policy, for example. This is an area where the views of the “anti-war” candidate Obama were thought to differ sharply from the hawkish approach of Hillary Clinton (now his Secretary of State!), not to mention the belligerent policies of Bush and McCain. In fact, Obama made it perfectly clear in *The Audacity of Hope* that he would deploy US troops when necessary, because “like it or not, if we want to make America more secure, we are going to have to help make the world more secure.” Rather than rejecting Bush’s absurd and counter-productive “war on terrorism,” Obama wrote that “the challenge will involve putting boots on the ground in ungoverned hostile regions where terrorists thrive.” And lest the reader imagine that such military force would only be used in retaliation, Obama claims that “we have the right to take unilateral military action to eliminate an *imminent* threat to our security.” It is something of a mystery how Obama managed to convince so many that he was a foreign policy “dove” while at the same time publishing such views.

But the surprising gap between what Obama himself pledged to do and the sort of president many of his supporters hoped he would become is not limited to the realm of foreign policy. For domestic policies as well, the real Obama has turned out to bear almost no resemblance to the second coming of FDR that more than a few had predicted or expected. At this point, I suspect, many “disillusioned” Democrats would be satisfied with a pale imitation of LBJ.



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Yet how can Obama be blamed for those false expectations? In his book, even while recognizing that FDR “saved capitalism from itself” through his New Deal reforms, Obama does not fundamentally criticize Reagan for setting about dismantling aspects of the welfare system. He even says that there is a “good deal of truth” in “Reagan’s central insight – that the liberal welfare state had grown complacent and overly bureaucratic.” And Obama, not surprisingly, praises Clinton, who “put a progressive slant on some of Reagan’s goals,” for achieving “some equilibrium” by creating a “smaller government, but one that retained the social safety net FDR had first put into place.”

Hardly the stuff of “socialism”

Obama is not so forthright in explaining his own welfare policies, but he implies that welfare should be a bare minimum. We should be “guided throughout,” he writes, “by Lincoln’s simple maxim: that we will do collectively, through our government, only those things that we cannot do as well or at all individually and private,” leading to “a dynamic free market and widespread economic security, entrepreneurial innovation and upward mobility.” This is hardly the stuff of “socialism” – or even of West European social democracy.

But there were many, even self-described socialists, who thought that

Disillusioned – But Not Half Disillusioned Enough!

Obama, whatever his statements during the campaign, would be compelled by the economic crisis itself or a growing working class movement, to enact policies similar to the New Deal of the 1930s. This expectation allowed such leftists to adopt the stance of backing Obama in the election without explicitly supporting his politics – adopting the posture of “critical support” of which they are so fond. (I can’t help wondering, though, why such socialists can’t set a goal higher than once again “saving capitalism from itself.”)

Yet in the midst of the continuing Great Recession, Obama has not budged from his belief that the solutions to the problems plaguing the United States can be found lying in the middle of the political road, so to speak, just waiting to be picked up. This is the belief he wrote about back in 2006, and his policies in office have been based on it.

Still, it was understandable that so many were drawn to Obama, despite his relative honesty regarding his own conservatism. Millions were sick to their guts of Bush and the Republicans and it was indeed “time for a change.” The cautious, compromising attitude of Obama could even appear principled compared to the reckless pigheadedness of Bush. The charisma of Obama was based on his self-presentation as the anti-Bush. Clearly, Obama appeared at the opportune time, when much of the population was desperate to believe that the country could change for the better, after eight long years when everything Bush touched turned to shit. This was the basis for the foolish – or “audacious” – hope that Obama could, almost single-handedly, set things right.

Obama’s once overpowering charisma has faded away, however. Now that few can remember exactly what it felt like to loathe the neocons, he no longer glows in the reflected light of the burning rage against Bush. Obama without Bush is a far less compelling act – like a “straightman” in a comedy duo who decides to go solo.

So people went from the naïve view that Bush is the root of all evil to the equally simplistic idea that Obama could uproot that evil. And now we have a sense of disillusionment due to the persistence of deep-rooted problems despite the election of Obama. Yet the idea that Obama has betrayed us is based on the initial illusion that he could rescue us from problems that are deeply rooted in capitalism itself. This notion, in turn, is no different from the superficial idea that those problems arose from Bush’s stupidity or mendacity. It is pointless to transform Obama from a saviour into a new scapegoat.

It is good that so many of Obama's followers are disillusioned. But they are not half as disillusioned as they need to be! Only when millions of people finally give up the illusion that capitalism can be fundamentally reformed to somehow create a more humane world will we be on the road to real social change.

MS



Obama: The Brand and the President

This was a “moment of madness” – a revolutionary, romantic moment when an entire society seems to be up for grabs. In these moments, fundamental change appears irresistible; for a brief moment, “all seems possible, all within reach.” Across time, people who get caught up in moments of madness imagine that their own “radiant vision” is at hand: a workers’ paradise, a grassroots democracy, fraternity-equality-liberty, or the Second Coming of Jesus. The utopian imagination is – suddenly, powerfully, briefly – inflamed by the immediate prospect of radical change, by visions of an apocalypse now.

This is Stephen D. O’Leary’s description of the eighteenth century Great Awakening, but it also calls to mind the way people have viewed Barack Obama. For a nation literally founded upon slavery, the election of a black president in the United States was a major social and political breakthrough. Obama also brings youth, as the first post-baby-boomer president, a winning personality and photogenic looks, and is the first president born of a “welfare mother.”

Obama entered the political sphere through the back door, as a community organizer, and became even more adroit at media manipulation than Saul Alinsky, who had a great influence on Obama and his methods of organizing. Obama has won many educational accolades: a graduate of the University of Chicago and of Harvard Law School, the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*, and a professor of constitutional law. Obama is also a loving father and devoted husband, a cigarette smoker (reputedly still trying to quit), a fairly good basketball player – and of course very intelligent. This all tends to make Obama sound like a pretty good fella in terms as far as “traditional American values” are concerned.

There are other views of Obama: as an illegal immigrant, a fascist, a socialist, a new Hitler or Stalin, a Moslem, the Antichrist – in short, the epitome of evil. But to many of his supporters Obama is a Christ-like

savior, who could part the seas, walk on water (after turning it into wine), and establish world peace. As Mark Morford wrote in *The San Francisco Chronicle*: “spiritually advanced people regard the new president as a “lightworker’ ... who can help usher in a new way of being on the planet.”

In trying to make sense of Obama, it is important to consider why the American public holds such diametrically opposed views of him. And this can also shed light on U.S. politics and culture as a whole. But an answer requires at least a brief look at some of the key underlying phenomena of our social world.

Marketer of the year

Barack Obama’s presidential campaign greatly impressed the Public Relations industry. *Advertising Age*, a PR industry mouthpiece, named Obama “*Advertising Age*’s marketer of the year for 2008” – easily beating Apple! This was industry recognition of “Brand Obama.”

Corporations which control our politics are more geared towards creating new distinctive brands, than producing different products. The new Brand Obama does not threaten those corporations any more than the Brand Bush it replaced. Brand Bush collapsed. We became immune to its studied folksiness and saw through its artifice. This sort of brand deflation is common in the advertising world. When it happens a new brand is needed – and we have been offered the new Obama brand, with its exciting and somewhat exotic appeal.¹

If advertising simply told the truth, admitting that there is little difference between our brand and rival brands, it would be counterproductive. Rather, advertising must rely on “image advertising” to somehow create the illusion of difference between brands.²

Brand Obama is an advertiser’s dream because he is so user-friendly. Obama is the sort of friendly guy that the typical person on the street would like to talk to. Brand Obama inspires trust and confidence, thanks to his modulated, deliberate, and articulate manner of speech.

History of PR

Before taking a closer look at the perceptions of Brand Obama, it may help to take a moment to examine how corporations came to gain such a

Obama: The Brand and the President

powerful influence that they could control American politics.

The corporate capitalist class that rules over us uses social science, technology, and propaganda to sustain the capitalist society that serves them. Instead of the town crier of olden times, they rely on the printing press, radio, television, and the Internet. All the media outlets today, with the exception of the Internet, have been institutionalized in the form of profit-making corporations. This means that what we think we know – our ideas and opinions and the words we use to express them – have been shaped by a dominant minority, the capitalist class. This is not so different from the proclamations the old town criers used to shout on the streets, which were drafted by the political rulers of the day; or the advertising copy they likewise shouted, provided to them by the propertied merchant shopkeepers.

This is not to deny the existence of fringe media today – but, by definition, mainstream media are corporate media and fringe media are, well, on the fringe, with a much smaller distribution. As for the Internet, it is a creature of the telecom corporations that own its constituent parts – that is, the search engines, servers, wire and fiber, as well as the leases on the parts of the radio spectrum that carry wi-fi. Telecoms, of course, have an economic interest, just like any other for-profit company.

It was not until the Industrial Revolution had brought about mass production and raised hopes of immensely high profits through mass marketing that researchers, toward the beginning of the twentieth century, began to study the motivations of many types of consumers and of their responses to various kinds of salesmanship, advertising, and other marketing techniques.³

As Robert W. McChesney writes in his book *The Political Economy of Media*: “Advertising amounts to propaganda. The advertising industry understood its own work along these lines well into the 1930s, when global developments saddled that term with negative connotations.” The term “propaganda” was then replaced by the newly coined expression “public relations”, but a skunk by any other name stinks just as bad.

In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky show that “the capitalist news media are far more about generating support for elite policies than they are about empowering people to make informed political decisions.”⁴ The idea of corporate

media influence on the public mind being by design is further bolstered by the vast amount of research done at the behest of big business to determine the stimuli that do in fact influence – and ultimately direct and control or even manufacture – public opinion.

From the early 1930s on, there have been “consumer surveys” much in the manner of public opinion surveys. *Almost every conceivable variable affecting consumers’ opinions, beliefs, suggestibility, and behavior has been investigated* for every kind of group, subgroup, and culture in the major capitalist nations.⁵

The Institute of Public Opinion Research founded by George Gallup in 1935 was one of the first organizations to use the science of psychology and the new science of sociology together to manipulate the individual and public mind toward ends that were not by nature or intent therapeutic. Since that time, the media have been an even more potent and integral tool in the manufacture of public opinion and consent.

Consumer surveys presented some problems to researchers by placing the respondent in the position of a sociologist, asking such questions as: “What socioeconomic class do you belong to?” or “How do claims made by a company affect your preference for their product?” Roughly 80% responded that they were part of the middle class and that advertising had no effect on their choices. Also there was the “lying factor” to be considered: some respondents would not be truthful about their income level, consumption habits, and so on. This problem has been greatly alleviated by technological developments, especially the use of computers and credit cards. ChoicePoint, a consumer research and marketing firm, uses supercooled computers operating at “petaflop” speed (a quadrillion calculations per second) to “crunch” hard data generated by credit card and Internet purchases among other sources.

The father of spin

The likely impetus for the consumer surveys of the early 1930s and the founding of the Gallup Institute in 1935 was the work of Edward Bernays, known as the “father of spin.”⁶ Bernays, who coined the term “public relations” as a euphemism for propaganda, set the template for effective propaganda. He joined the early women’s liberation movement⁷ and manipulated it to his own advantage. In 1929, as a propagandist for the American Tobacco Company, Bernays exploited the ideas of his uncle Sigmund Freud to induce more women to smoke

Obama: The Brand and the President

cigarettes – he dubbed them “torches of freedom” – as a symbol of their liberation. The number of women smokers more than doubled, and tobacco profits rose accordingly.

Bernays was a versatile operator whose talents included not only shaping consumer behavior but also overthrowing foreign government. In the early 1950s, the United Fruit Company, alarmed at the threat posed to their interests in Guatemala by the land reform policy of President Jacobo Arbenz, hired Bernays to get rid of Arbenz for them. Bernays’ lobbying and “disinformation” (a fancy word for lies) played a critical role in bringing about U.S. military intervention to depose Arbenz in June 1954.

Bernays often spoke of an “invisible government,” which he envisaged as encompassing together all media: PR, the press, broadcasting, advertising, and their power of branding and image making. In other words, the organs of *disinformation*.⁸

If you ate bacon and eggs for breakfast this morning, you probably don’t realize that bacon and eggs for breakfast, now culturally accepted as the norm throughout the United States, is a direct result of Bernays’ PR campaign in the mid-1920s for the Beechnut Packing Company, a huge bacon producer.⁹

Obama’s slogans

Just as “torches of freedom” rallied women around the desire for their liberation, so did Obama’s slogans – “Yes we can!”, “The audacity of hope,” “Change we can believe in” – rally people around their desire for political change. These slogans are really *koans* – ambiguous and indefinable.

However, in a “moment of madness” his slogans became associated with the “radiant vision” (psychological projection) of a mass of oppressed and exploited people who wanted to believe that a single political leader could fix the problems of the world. It seemed to them that the whole of society was “up for grabs.” This was a result of “identity politics.” The people who elected Barack Obama president were – to use the language of covert agents – victims of a psy-op (psychological operation).

Obama is a mere incident in a long string of similar incidents. The hype

over Obama is directly related to the length of his campaign. “Team Obama” took PR to its limit as a form of brainwashing. The media representations based on Obama’s PR became the collective social representations of millions of people. Brand Obama was elected to the Oval Office, though *President* Obama is who the U.S. is stuck with. Brand Obama is smoke and mirrors, an optical illusion. Unravel the spin that surrounds Obama and it will be clear that Obama is neither an incarnation of evil nor a paragon of enlightenment. That is all hype, propaganda, a manufactured controversy.

A good question to ask here is: Why are the media interested in inventing controversy? It’s an old, traditional business practice that Upton Sinclair explained in his book *The Brass Check*:

We in America speak of steel kings and coal barons, lords of wheat and lumber and oil and railroads, and think perhaps that we are using metaphors. But the simple fact is that the men to whom we refer occupy in the world of industry precisely the same position and fill precisely the same roles as were filled in the political world by King Louis, who said: “I am the state.”

This power of concentrated wealth which rules America is known by many names. It is “Wall Street”; it is “big business”; it is “the trusts.” It is the “System” of Lincoln Steffens, the “invisible government” of Woodrow Wilson, the “Empire of Business” of Andrew Carnegie, the “plutocracy” of the populists. . . . The one difference between the Empire of Business and the Empire of Louis is that the former exists side by side with a political democracy. To keep this political democracy subservient to its ends, the industrial autocracy maintains and subsidizes two rival political machines, and every now and then stages an elaborate sham-battle – but all sensible men understand that, whichever way the contest is decided, business will continue to be business and money will continue to talk. . .

Journalism is one of the devices whereby industrial autocracy keeps its control over political democracy. It is the day-by-day, between-elections propaganda, whereby the minds of the people are kept in a state of acquiescence. . . . We define journalism in America as the business and practice of presenting the news of the day in the interest of economic privilege. . . . A capitalist newspaper [any capitalist media outlet] may espouse this cause or that, it may make this pretense or that, but sooner or later

Obama: The Brand and the President

you'll realize that a capitalist newspaper lives by the capitalist system, it fights for that system, and in the nature of the case cannot do otherwise.¹⁰

If controversy increases newspaper subscriptions, or if Arbitron or Nielson certify through market research that the number of radio listeners or TV viewers has increased, then capitalism is being served and the controversy will continue with ever greater nastiness and vigor. The soul of any capitalist media outlet is kept alive by advertising revenue, the lion's share of its profits. Elections are not battles fought over moral causes between good and evil, right and wrong; they are fought to decide which gang of cronies and abettors get to feed at the trough of public funds, prestige, and power.

The mainstream corporate media, like any other for-profit business organization, is center-right conservative. Corporations in general want an established legal framework to protect private property, contracts, and security – a “business-friendly” right-wing government. “What’s good for industry is good for America.”

Social unrest resulting from an awareness of political, social, and economic injustice is anathema to orderly business practice because the people suffering such oppression and discrimination tend to agitate or rebel, usually against the privileged politicians and business owners who are seen to be their exploiters. In “less civilized” countries, where there is a less uniform blanket of media propaganda blinding people to the realities, unrest often translates into mobs destroying private property or looting. But even in “advanced countries” like the United States, social unrest can result in rebellion and violence.

Corporate media, under the banner of “professional journalism,” provide news coverage that tends to be a barrage of facts and official statements with little or no contextualization. Basically this means that *if something happens*, it's news. This leads to crucial social issues such as racism or environmental degradation falling through the cracks if there is no event like a demonstration or the release of an official report to justify coverage. The 1968 Report of the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders specifically cited poor coverage and lack of contextualization by the mainstream media of civil rights issues *over the years* as strongly contributing to the climate that led to the riots of the 1960s.¹¹

When the mainstream media do report on this push-back against repression by disaffected segments of the population, the righteous

anger of the group concerned is generalized under the heading of “mass hysteria” or “discontent.” (When anger gets out of control, the entire system comes into question. Legitimacy is not an issue until it is questioned.)

The news media *frame* the issue in terms of the rational motives related to contracts, debts, efficiency, jobs, and concern for public order, on one side, and the “criminal chaos and wanton destruction” on the other side, in order to justify draconian suppression, which in turn ensures that grievances will not be rectified. The larger issue of the injustices that caused the insurrection in the first place does not fit the media’s imposed framework, and a “riot” is not seen as resistance to systemic injustice. The media framework is becoming narrower and narrower, limiting the public’s field of vision to a tiny window – like viewing the sky through a straw.

The advertisement below illustrates the infantile idea of freedom inculcated by the media and the true value of “democracy” in action:

Read this ad. Or don't. An exercise in freedom.

By deciding to continue reading, you've just demonstrated a key American freedom – choice. And, should you choose to turn the page, take a nap, or go dye your hair blue, that's cool too.

Because while rights like freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press get all the attention in the Constitution, the smaller liberties you can enjoy every day in America are no less important or worthy of celebration.

Your right to backyard barbecues, sleeping in on Sundays, and listening to any darned music you please can be just as fulfilling as your right to vote for the president. Maybe even more so, because you can enjoy these freedoms personally and often.

Advertising Council advertisement

*New York Times, September 12, 2002*¹²

Propaganda is ubiquitous today. – There are literally thousands of written, audiovisual, and organizational media that a modern-day propagandist might use to give a “grassroots” feel or image to the

Obama: The Brand and the President

agenda s/he is promoting. All human groupings are potential organizational media (the medium becomes the message) – from the family and other small organizations through advertising and public relations firms, trade unions, churches, mosques, temples, theaters, music, poetry, special interest groups, political parties, and front organizations, to the governmental structures of nations, international coalitions, and global organizations like the United Nations and its agencies.¹³

The privately held and publicly traded transnational corporations are the capitalist class' main global business and propaganda organizations. Under the neoliberal ethos, corporations are subsuming many governmental functions through privatization or so-called “public-private partnerships.” As Naomi Klein shows in her book *The Shock Doctrine*, this is actually *privateering*. It leads to a corporatist state, administered by CEOs and boards of directors in accordance with the dictates of the “free market” – that is, the narrow self-interest and short-term profit of the capitalist class – in place of a democracy (however nominal) administered by elected officials answerable to the people. Neoliberalism is itself an ideology resting on propaganda and disinformation.

In the U.S., we've been given the Republican and Democratic brands of politician. If you are a Democrat, you have been taught to believe that the Republicans are the party of big business while the Democrats are the party of the workers. If you are a Republican, you believe the propaganda that the Democrats are “tax and spend Big Government liberals” while the Republicans are the party of individual freedoms and a small efficient government that gets out of the way. Such are the wiles of propaganda. These two parties are really one party with two names. As “all political parties are but the expression of class interests”¹⁴ and as the Republican and Democratic parties represent the interests of capital, they are therefore the Capitalist Party.

As Lance Selfa explains in *The Democratic Party and the Politics of Lesser Evilism*, voter turnout is historically low in the U.S. because many voters know that neither mainstream party represents their interests; many others vote for “the lesser of two evils while holding their noses.”¹⁵

Sock-puppets

Political candidates running for the job of administering capitalism must

raise staggering amounts of corporate money to compete. (The Obama/McCain horse race cost over \$1 billion.) After the election is over, the winner (and even the loser) is beholden to a phalanx of corporate lobbyists who actually write much of the legislation for their newly elected “sock-puppets” to pass into law. Another bunch of “sock-puppets of capital” - the political appointees on the U.S. Supreme Court - recently codified a guarantee that the voice of anyone trying to get elected on a platform opposed to capital will be drowned out. The ruling of these robed sock-puppets in the “Citizens United” case allows unlimited corporate financial support for political advertising, raising the cost of political free speech even higher: free speech is money, because “money talks.”

The corporate gatekeepers of U.S. power are not about to hand the world’s most powerful office over to some progressive opponent of empire and inequality. They determined that Obama *as a politician* was a privilege-friendly person of the corporate neoliberal center eight years ago, when they decided to finance his campaign for the Senate in Illinois. In a *New Yorker* essay, Larissa MacFarquhar wrote:

In his view of history, in his respect for tradition, in his skepticism that the world can be changed any way but very, very slowly, Obama is deeply conservative... He values continuity and stability for their own sake. (“The Conciliator,” May 7, 2007).

A year later, Ryan Lizza wrote: “Perhaps the greatest misconception about Barack Obama is that he is some sort of anti-establishment revolutionary. Rather, every stage of his political career has been marked by an eagerness to accommodate himself to existing institutions rather than tear them down or replace them” (“Making It,” *New Yorker*, July 21, 2008). As far back as 1996, right at the start of Obama’s political career, Adolph Reed, Jr., a leftish black political scientist, wrote in *The Village Voice*:

We’ve gotten a foretaste of the new breed of foundation-hatched black communitarian voices. One of them [Barack Obama] is a smooth Harvard lawyer with impeccable credentials and vacuous-to-repressive neoliberal politics... and the predictable elevation of process over program – the point where identity politics converges with old-fashioned middle class reform in favoring form over substance. I suspect his ilk is the wave of the future in U.S. black politics here, as in Haiti and wherever the International Monetary Fund holds sway.

Obama: The Brand and the President

Milan Kundera says: “The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” *Memory is always subversive*: it goes back to the foundations laid in the past and discovers where the edifice of today has deviated, and what forces caused the deformity.

Paint by numbers

Looking at the Obama of yesterday and today, we find he’s remained pretty close to the game plan set for him by the system. He’s an example of “paint by numbers” – a direct product *of* the system. His education prepared him for “institutional systems management” and being totally immersed in the system he’s unable to imagine anything beyond it.

This is why he was able to garner record-setting corporate campaign contributions for his presidential run, over \$33 million of which came from FIRE (the finance, insurance, and real estate sector), including \$824,202 from Goldman Sachs. And he earned that money when he saved FIRE by means of top-down bailouts (as against bottom-up mortgage subventions), toothless financial “reform,” and a close-to-negative interest rate at the Fed discount window through his proxies Summers and Geithner. That’s Obamanomics – traditional voodoo Reaganomics, neoliberal trickle-down supply-side theory. There is a highly positive and suggestive correlation here between Obama’s actions and economic determinism – in other words, “he who pays Obama names the tune.”

In a June 5, 2009 editorial, *The Wall Street Journal* called Obama “Barack Hussein Bush” and declared that “one benefit of the Obama presidency is that it is validating much of George W. Bush’s security agenda and foreign policy [by] artfully repackaging versions of themes President Bush sounded with his Freedom Agenda.” The editorial noted with approval that Obama was offering “a robust defense of the war in Afghanistan” as “a war of necessity” and continuing the Bush policy in Iraq.

While President Obama preserves the core of Bush’s foreign policy, Team Obama is exploring new tactics in an attempt to establish full spectrum dominance in these countries and in the Middle East as a whole. Team Obama (Gates, Clinton, Petraeus, etc.) are stressing the expansion of NATO and substituting NATO for the UN as the world’s main “peacemaker.”

Thus, corporate political sock-puppet *President* Obama has his own coterie of puppets to perform the more insidious machinations of global dominance that the president of the U.S. empire is duty bound to pursue, while keeping the involvement of *Brand* Obama out of the public mind – a page out of Machiavelli’s playbook. The progressive political rhetoric cannot hide the fact that under the Obama administration “defense” (i.e., war) spending has been 8 times higher than spending on education, 4.5 times higher than spending on “income security,” 14 times higher than spending on housing, and 32 times higher than spending on “job training.” Defense spending now exceeds half of *all* discretionary government spending. Like Yogi Berra said, “you’ll be surprised at what you see – if ya look!”

On April 5, 2009, *Brand* Obama announced: “So today I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” In early 2010, *President* Obama submitted his first comprehensive budget, which included a 13% increase in government funding for the National Nuclear Security Administration and a 14% increase in the funding of nuclear weapons activities. Refer again to Yogi’s maxim! The mainstream media seldom provide detail or context, but the website govtrack.us, while not exhaustive, can give a deeper insight into the actualities.

Duplicity on climate change

On climate change too, *Brand* Obama talks the good talk. He acknowledges the reality of the catastrophe that looms over the planet and all its creatures and gently berates the climate change deniers. *Brand* Obama speaks of alternative energy resources and renewable and sustainable technologies. But *President* Obama avoids talking about a carbon tax and proposes a “free market solution” in the form of “cap and trade,” which would create a commodity market in C&T futures from which Wall Street would be able to reap a trillion dollar windfall in fees over time.

At Copenhagen, *President* Obama seemed to merge with his *alter ego*, at least to the discerning eye, when he took the unilateral path so common and necessary to empires, bypassing the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) “negotiations.” On December 18, 2009, he traipsed into the Bella Center to announce: “Here is the bottom line: we can embrace this accord, take a substantial step forward, and continue to

Obama: The Brand and the President

refine it and build upon its foundation – or we can choose delay, falling back into the same divisions that have stood in the way of action for years.” What “accord”?! While the representatives of hundreds of countries were engaged in the official negotiations, *President* Obama had struck an accord with the governments of China, India, South Africa, and Brazil.

Claudia Caldera, the Venezuelan delegate, told *President* Obama: “After keeping us waiting for hours, after several leaders from developed countries have told the media an agreement has been reached when we haven’t even been given a text, you throw the paper on the table and try to leave the room.” Hugo Chavez concisely summed up the situation:

In Copenhagen, from the beginning, the cards were on the table for all to see. On the one hand, the cards of capitalism, which in its brutal meanness and stupidity never budged from defense of its logic, the logic of capital, which leaves only death and destruction in its wake at an increasingly rapid pace. On the other hand, the cards of the peoples demanding human dignity, the salvation of the planet, and radical change – not of the climate, but of a world system that has brought us to the brink of unprecedented ecological and social catastrophe.¹⁶

The language in the Copenhagen Accord guarantees continued runaway climate change. It contains no legally binding targets for emissions reductions, which are set by each country independently.¹⁷ Supporters of Brand Obama back in the United States think: “At least Obama got *something* done,” but they fail to see that his actions derailed substantive debate with those countries which are suffering the worst effects of global warming, despite having had at most a miniscule part in causing the problem – debate that could have led to change more adequate to the situation.

Politicians in the goldfish bowl

Brand Obama was manufactured by the elites of wealth and power who administer and benefit from the capitalist system. One brand may be shinier than another. It may have some extra bells and whistles. But if it is a brand at all, that means it is a commodity. Commodities of a given type originate from a prototype and are designed to function alike, though some may perform better than others. Candidate Obama was a

slick brand and a majority of U.S. voters fell for him. In assuming office, the brand was transmogrified into another type of commodity – a president. Now, as always, buyers’ remorse is setting in.

There is a special term used by social scientists: “total environment.” It is applied to certain countries (Iran, North Korea, China under Mao) as well as prisons, mental asylums, and military bases of occupation in foreign countries. It can also be applied to the legal, political, and educational systems in which our political “leaders” are immersed like goldfish in a bowl. But the best example of a total environment – the most far-reaching and deeply penetrating – is the world capitalist system, a system that is not just economic but also political and social.

In 1971, Philip Zimbardo conducted what came to be known as “the Stanford Prison Experiment.” He created a total environment system in the basement of the Stanford Psychology Department and found that it transformed its denizens in accordance with its own logic. The experiment had to be called off after six days because of the harsh and brutal behavior that the system generated in the test subjects.

With certain exceptions, politicians are not evil men and women. They are merely products of the system and have been lured and lulled by its incentives. The world of politics has gradually turned inward, absorbed in its internal problems, interests, and rivalries. Politicians capable of understanding and expressing the expectations and demands of their constituents are rare if not extinct. They lose their distinctive features and merge into a uniform mass.

Future leaders are selected in television debates on the basis of image. They become prisoners of an entourage of young technocrats who often know almost nothing about the everyday lives of their fellow citizens. But they will have little occasion to be reminded of their ignorance. Even those who do not come from well-to-do backgrounds are molded by their education at Harvard, Yale, and other elite institutions, where they make the upper class connections that will launch them on their future careers. Social exclusivity insulates the “political class” like a school of goldfish in a goldfish bowl from the larger society of ordinary people, with their trials and tribulations, their modest satisfactions and accomplishments.

Instead of shooting fish in a barrel, we have to save those fish from drowning in their septic goldfish bowl, for fish discover water last and only dead fish go with the flow. And the only way to save them is to

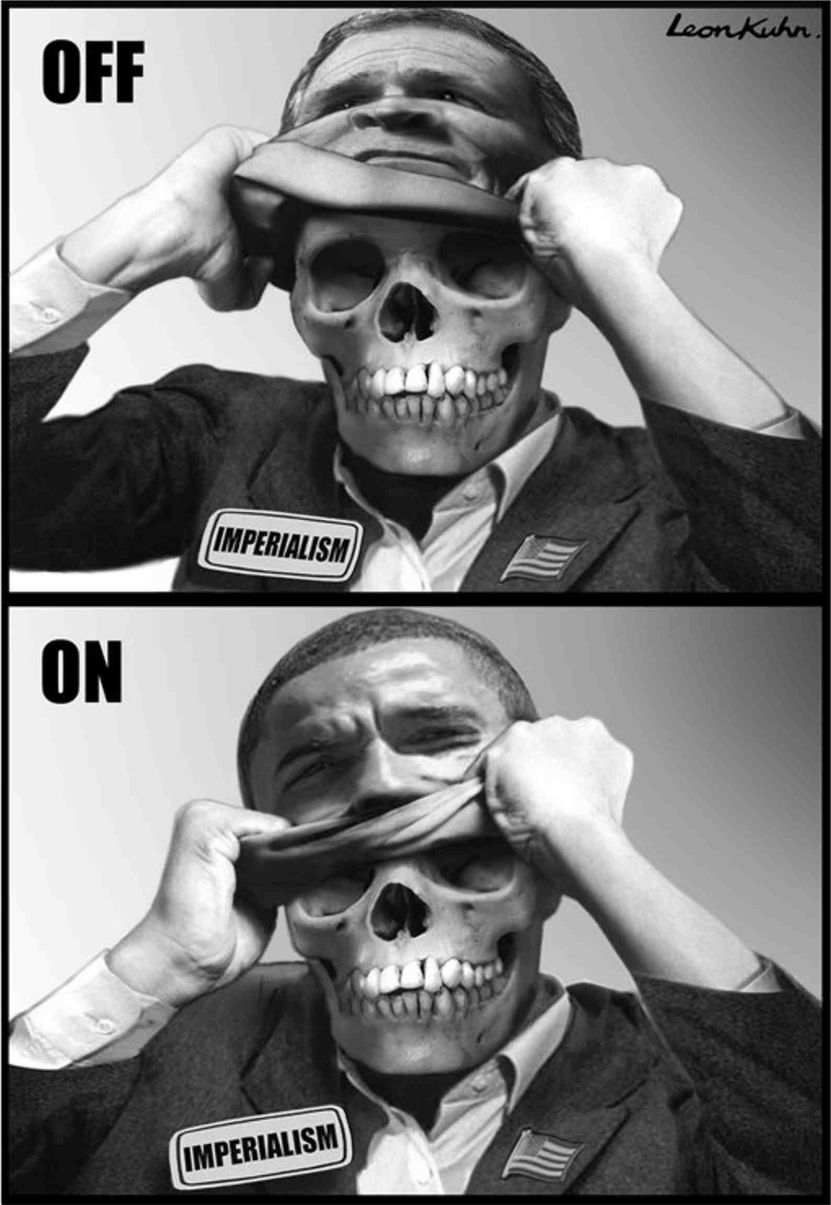
Obama: The Brand and the President

persuade the mass of people who put or keep them in their bowl to decide that the current system is no damn good and to change it NOW!

Joe Hopkins

Notes

- [1] Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion* (Alternative Radio Transcript, uncopyrighted, 2009), p. 3.
- [2] Robert W. McChesney, *The Problem of the Media* (Monthly Review Press, 2004), p. 142.
- [3] *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 26, pp. 173 et seq.
- [4] Robert W. McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media* (Monthly Review Press, 2008), p. 83.
- [5] *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 26, pp. 173 et seq.
- [6] Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations* (Henry Holt & Co., 1998).
- [7] He and his wife Doris Fleischman “both joined the Lucy Stone League, a feminist group” (Tye, *The Father of Spin*, p. 122).
- [8] John Pilger, *Imperialism in the Age of Obama* (Alternative Radio Transcript, uncopyrighted, 2009), p. 1.
- [9] Tye, *The Father of Spin*, p. 51.
- [10] Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check* (uncopyrighted, 1919), pp. 222 et seq.
- [11] McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media*, p. 33.
- [12] McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media*, pp. 167 – 8.
- [13] *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 26, pp. 173 et seq.
- [14] *The Socialist Standard*, any issue, Declaration of Principles, point 7.
- [15] Lance Selfa, *The Democratic Party and the Politics of Lesser Evilism* (internationalsocialism.org/resources.html).
- [16] Ann Pearlmann and Orin Langelles, “What Really Happened in Copenhagen,” *Z Magazine*, February 2010, pp. 23 – 4.
- [17] Pearlmann and Langelles, “What Really Happened.”



The World Outlook of the Young Obama

The world outlook of Barack Obama before his political career took off in the mid-1990s has been a matter of speculation. His Republican opponents back up their claim that he was – or even still is – a “socialist” by reference to certain hints of an early radicalism, while the same hints have encouraged leftists to place their hopes in him. These speculations pertain mainly to Obama’s time as a student at Columbia University and a community organizer in Chicago (see Timeline).

Scarcity of evidence

Clear evidence for assessing the outlook of the young Obama is scarce. He hardly left a paper trail. There is a single article that appears under his name in the Columbia student journal *Sundial*,¹ but it is a descriptive survey of the various anti-war and pro-disarmament groups active on campus and tells us very little of his own opinions. Later he attracted attention as the first African-American president of the *Harvard Law Review*, and yet he himself never contributed a signed article to this journal.² Phil Boerner, a close friend at Columbia, recalls how in late-night student discussions Obama “listened carefully to all points of view” and was “funny, smart, thoughtful, and well-liked.”³ Reluctance freely to express his own thoughts – at this stage, perhaps, motivated solely by the desire to be well liked – was to prove an important political asset.

Thus, we have to rely heavily on Obama’s *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, first published in 1995, which tells the story of his life up to his admission to Harvard Law School in 1988. Like other life stories written by American politicians, the book conveys an impression of frankness and sincerity: intimate feelings are explored, painful family sores laid bare, heart-to-heart conversations reconstructed. But in one crucial respect this is a deceptive impression. How did Obama’s outlook on the world take shape and evolve? Which authors, professors, speakers, or friends had an influence on his thinking?⁴ What were the main issues discussed in those late-night sessions? Here Obama is frustratingly reticent. He does not even say

Timeline of Obama as a Child and Young Man

- 1961 Born to Ann Dunham and Barack Obama, Sr. in Hawaii
- 1963 Parents separate. In care of mother and grandparents
- 1967 - age 6 Mother marries Lolo Soetoro. Move to Jakarta, Indonesia
- 1971 - age 10 Sent back to attend school and live with grandparents in Hawaii
- 1972 - age 11 Mother returns to Hawaii with half-sister Maya. Father visits.
- 1979 - age 18 Student at Occidental College, Los Angeles
- 1981 - age 20 In first public speech calls for Occidental's divestment from South Africa. Transfers to Columbia University in New York, majoring in political science with specialty in international relations. Visits Indonesia, India, and Pakistan.
- 1982 - age 21 Informed of father's death by relatives in Kenya
- 1983 - age 22 Publishes article in student journal Sundial. Seeks but fails to find job as community organizer. After graduation works as research assistant at Business International Corporation (consulting house to corporations), then at New York Public Interest Research Group
- 1985 - age 23 Community organizer with church-based Developing Communities Project on Chicago's South Side
- 1988 - age 26 Visits father's relatives in Kenya. Starts studies at Harvard Law School
- 1990 - age 28 President of Harvard Law Review
- 1991 - age 29 Graduates from Harvard. Starts writing Dreams from my Father (published 1995)
- 1992 - age 30 Returns to Chicago. Joins law firm. Marries Michelle. Directs voter registration project. Starts teaching constitutional law at University of Chicago Law School
- 1996 - age 34 Elected to Illinois State Senate. Start of political career

The World Outlook of the Young Obama

when, where, and on what subject he made his first public speech (see Timeline for the answer).

Are these topics just not sensational enough for the wide reading public? No doubt, but in the preface to the 2004 edition he acknowledges another major concern when he remarks that “certain passages have proven to be inconvenient politically, the grist for pundit commentary and opposition research.” So even greater reticence in certain areas might have been in his interest as a budding politician.

I shall return to analyze the political content of these two early Obama texts, but first I would like to examine the story that Obama tells in *Dreams from My Father*. I shall not try to retrace Obama’s extremely complex biography in detail,⁵ but rather focus on three specific themes. Two of these are themes that strike me as important – first, the conflicting values that his mother and stepfather taught him as a child in Indonesia; and second, his attitude toward worldly ambition and attraction to community organizing as a vocation. The third theme – the dramatic quest to learn more about his Kenyan father – is one that Obama makes central to his story but may be less significant than it seems.

Conflicting messages

The two people who had the greatest impact on Obama as a child were his mother Ann Dunham and his Indonesian stepfather Lolo Soetoro. His maternal grandparents also played a part in his upbringing, but their influence on him seems to have been somewhat weaker. His parents separated when he was still a baby; his father met him on a visit when he was 11, but the encounter was a brief and awkward one.

Ann Dunham, an anthropologist, was a progressive Democrat in the FDR tradition, “a soldier for New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism” (p. 50). In other words, she stood at the “left” pole of the American political mainstream, though definitely not outside it. In no sense was she a socialist. She did have a firm commitment to humanitarian values and taught her son to be kind, sympathetic, and generous to others.

The message Barack received from his stepfather was very different. Lolo Soetoro had struggled to survive in a very harsh environment – he married Ann not long after the CIA-backed coup of 1965 and the

massacres that followed – and “made his peace with power” (p. 45). He taught the boy that it is necessary for a man, though not perhaps for a woman, to be tough and egoistic. If you give your money away to beggars, he warns, you will end up begging on the streets yourself. “Men take advantage of weakness in other men... The strong man takes the weak man’s land. He makes the weak man work in his fields. He takes the weak man’s woman if he wants her.” So, asks Lolo, which do you want to be – the strong man or the weak man?⁶

How did Obama cope with these conflicting demands? He tells us that he had great admiration for his stepfather and found his philosophy of life more relevant to the “violent, unpredictable, and often cruel” world that he saw around him (pp. 37–8). And yet he could hardly escape the continued influence of his mother. My conjecture is that he sought to ease the conflict by somehow reconciling power (“strength”) with compassion – a problem that has no fully satisfactory solution.

Making it

Obama was much troubled in his youth by questions of identity (“Who am I?”) and life goals (“What do I want to do with my life?”). At this period he was not ambitious in the conventional sense. He wanted to change the world for the better. As a student at Columbia, according to Boerner, he at first wanted to become a writer. Then in 1983 he “decided to become a community organizer” (p. 133) and “mobilize the grass roots” to improve conditions in depressed city areas. He did not want to occupy high office or climb the corporate ladder.

The truth of these assertions is borne out by his behavior. After his first attempts to find a position as a community organizer fail, he takes a job in a corporation, where he feels like “a spy behind enemy lines.” But this is a temporary expedient: Obama still intends to be a community organizer. When he confides his plans to a security guard in the lobby, the man urges him not to try to help others but to stay and “make it” in the corporate world (pp. 135–6). Then a civil rights organization offers him a job, but he turns it down because he dislikes the orientation of the organization toward “forging links with business and government” (pp. 138–9). Eventually he gets a poorly paid job as a community organizer with a church-based project on Chicago’s decaying South Side. Many of the people he meets cannot fathom what he is doing there. Surely a bright young college graduate like him could be doing better for himself?

The World Outlook of the Young Obama

The crunch came when the opportunity arose for Obama to study law at Harvard with financial aid from a liberal foundation. He realized that this was a turning point in his life. Sensing his unease, his colleagues reassured him⁷ that they had no bad feelings about him seizing this chance: “We’re just proud to see you succeed” (pp. 275–6).

From then on there would be no turning back. Finally yielding to the expectations of those around him, Obama decided to make it – whatever that might entail.

A skeptical reader might suspect that this account is contrived to put the author in the best possible light. Obama manages to have his cake and eat it: he gets to pursue his ambition, but only after long hesitation has displayed his moral scruples. It reminds me of how Shakespeare’s Caesar does not accept the crown until it is offered to him for the third time.

Obama and Alinsky

How are we to explain Obama’s temporary commitment to community organizing? Why did he consider it the key to progressive social change? Did he develop this idea on his own? If not, where did he get it from? As he does not tell us, we shall have to engage in some guesswork.

The head of the project for which Obama worked in Chicago was a man he calls Marty Kaufman. One “opposition researcher” claims that Marty’s real name was Gerald Kellman and that he was a “follower” of Saul Alinsky (1909–1972). Indeed, Alinsky is widely regarded as a founder of modern community organizing, so whoever “Marty” may have been it is plausible to suppose that Obama’s thinking may have been influenced – directly or indirectly, at Columbia or in Chicago – by ideas that came from Alinsky.

Alinsky set out his ideas in two books – *Reveille for Radicals* and *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*, first published in 1946 and 1971, respectively. The primary purpose of these texts is to give radicals, defined as “those filled with deep feeling for people,” practical advice on how to organize communities and stage effective but legal protest actions.

How does Alinsky envision the long-term goal of community organizing? This is hard to say, because he considers it dogmatic and undemocratic for radicals to suggest programs or any ideology “more specific than that of America’s founding fathers: “For the general welfare”” (*Rules*, p. 4).⁸ The task of radicals is “to create mass organizations to seize power and give it to the people.” Strategies and goals will emerge spontaneously from the mass movement: “If people have the power to act, in the long run they will, most of the time, reach the right decisions. The alternative to this would be rule by the elite – either a dictatorship or some form of a political aristocracy” (p. 11). Nevertheless, he does specify that power is to be used “for a more equitable distribution of the means of life for all people” (p. 10). He also describes the ultimate goal as “revolution,” which according to him means “equality, justice, peace, cooperation, equal and full opportunities for education, full and useful employment, health, and the creation of those circumstances in which man can have the chance to live by values that give meaning to life.”

While his radical-sounding language may well shock the more timid members of the establishment, Alinsky has no clear conception of an alternative society or of how it might be achieved. Community organizers on the ground discover a chasm between the rhetoric and the limits to what community organizing is able to achieve under the pressures of global capitalism. Disillusionment naturally follows. There are indications that Obama went through something like this in Chicago: “Ain’t nothing gonna change, Mr. Obama,” one of his local activists tells him (*Dreams from My Father*, p. 248).

Although Alinsky rejects the Leninist concept of the vanguard party of professional revolutionaries, he shares some of Lenin’s basic assumptions. He too draws a sharp dividing line between intellectuals capable of abstract thought – the radicals to whom alone his books are addressed – and ordinary people who relate only to their own immediate experience⁸ and whom the radicals try to organize. He is aware of the dangers inherent in this division but sees no way of overcoming it. His only remedy is to urge radicals to exercise self-restraint.

Obama’s quest for his father

Before Obama starts at Harvard, he makes a trip to Kenya to get to know his relatives on his father’s side and find out more about who his now deceased father was. This is the dramatic culmination of the story

The World Outlook of the Young Obama

that Obama tells about himself in *Dreams from My Father*. And, of course, the very title of the book implies that his father, with whom he had so little contact during his life, is nonetheless central to his own identity. The reader is told a fair amount about Obama Senior's background, character, and life story. There is also a great deal that the reader is not told.

Two points bear emphasis.

First, to the extent that Barack's father serves him as a model, he is more of a negative than a positive model. In conventional terms, Obama Senior was a failure. Unlike Barack's stepfather, he did not "make his peace with power." Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first post-independence president, dismissed him from his position as a senior government economist because he was a "troublemaker," forever protesting against corruption and incompetence. Impoverished and ostracized by former colleagues, many of whom he had helped in the past, he became an embittered alcoholic and wife-beater. The story of his father was a perfect case study for Lolo's old lesson that generosity and selflessness are a fool's errand, and surely reinforced Barack's recent decision to "make it." From his father he learned ... not to be like his father.

Second, *Dreams from My Father* is completely silent about the policy aspect of Obama Senior's work in government and of his difficult relations with Kenyatta and other Kenyan political figures. How did he define his political stance? What did he regard as the chief problems facing Kenya and what development strategy did he advocate to tackle them? What foreign policy did he favor? The reader searches in vain for any enlightenment on such questions. Certainly Barack could have looked into these matters had he so wished. Was he not interested? Perhaps he was but decided not to write about his father's politics because that would have been "inconvenient politically." A little research into the subject makes this quite a plausible interpretation.

In 1964, a year after Kenya gained independence from Britain, the Kenyan parliament adopted a blueprint for national planning prepared by the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, entitled *African Socialism and Its Applicability to Planning in Kenya*.¹⁰ The *East Africa Journal* devoted its July 1965 issue to critiques of this paper; one of the critiques, entitled "Problems Facing Our Socialism," came from Obama Senior, who had recently returned home from the U.S. after divorcing Ann Dunham.¹¹

“African socialism” was the official ideology of several newly independent African states at that time. As Obama Senior laments, it had no clear definition beyond the general idea of adapting “socialism” to African traditions and conditions. The African tradition considered most compatible with “socialism” was that of communal – that is, clan and tribal – land ownership. However, the doctrine of African socialism was not taken as seriously in Kenya as it was, say, in Tanzania. In this sense, Obama Senior was closer to Nyerere than to Kenyatta. The official planning blueprint was full of evasions and distortions designed to justify or obscure the government’s *de facto* pursuit of neo-colonialist policies acceptable to the predominantly white and Asian business elite and to the Western powers. In his article, Obama Senior systematically exposes these evasions and distortions, complains of social polarization, the concentration of economic power, and foreign domination, and advocates such policies as creation of clan cooperatives, higher taxation on the rich, development priority for rural areas neglected under colonialism, “Africanization” of managerial personnel, and a consistently non-aligned foreign policy.

What can our president-to-be write about his father’s politics? On the one hand, he dare not express sympathy with an “anti-Western” and “anti-American” viewpoint. On the other hand, repudiating his father’s stance would rather spoil the dramatic plot of reclaiming his African heritage. Much better to say nothing at all.

Political content of early Obama texts

It is helpful to compare *Dreams from My Father* with Obama’s second book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, which appeared in 2006, when Obama was already in the U.S. Senate, ten years after first running for political office. While the two books are recognizably by the same author, there are clear differences in style and political content.

Audacity fits wholly and comfortably within the confines of mainstream American capitalist discourse. A person who reads it but has not also read *Dreams* may well ask: “Why are there so many illusions about this guy? He never claims to be anything but a very moderate Democrat.” In fact, *Dreams* too stays within the confines of mainstream discourse most of the time. Here and there, however, we encounter a passage with a more radical flavor, hinting at a deeper understanding of the systemically unjust and exploitative nature of the existing order.

The World Outlook of the Young Obama

Thus, in *Dreams* Obama eloquently explains the misery of Chicago's South Side as an outcome of the process of capitalist globalization (pp. 183–4). Contrast this with the wholly positive vision of “the globalizing world” that he presents in *Audacity* (Chapter 8). Another example is in the Epilogue to *Dreams*, where he calls law – the subject he is now studying – “a sort of glorified accounting that serves to regulate the affairs of those who have power” (p. 437).

These “radical” passages never go anywhere. No conclusion is ever drawn regarding the need for systemic change. There is simply a jarring reversion to the mainstream discourse. For Obama's limited radicalism is devoid of any vision of an alternative society. His “hope” is not “audacious” enough to contemplate that possibility! Those who do still believe in revolutionary change are “incurably naïve, wedded to lost hopes” (p. xv).

And yet if we go back far enough, to Obama's 1983 article in *Sundial*, we find the following: “One is forced to wonder whether disarmament or arms control issues, severed from political and economic issues, might be another instance of focusing on the symptoms of a problem rather than the disease itself.” Of course, we cannot decode this sentence without knowing how the author conceives of the “disease” – that is, the political and economic roots of war. And, of course, he does not tell us! But this is perhaps the closest that Obama has ever come to identifying a global malady that requires a cure.

Conclusion

Where does this leave us? There are, I think, sufficient grounds for describing the young Obama as an anti-establishment radical. Not a very radical sort of radical, to be sure – a “radical” who sees existing society for what it is but has no vision of a radically different society. But consider the matter in historical perspective: what other American president has ever emerged from a background that was even a little bit radical? In this sense, Obama is a new phenomenon.

Once the budding politician left behind the company of students and community activists, some of them more radical than he, and started to cultivate slumlords and financiers, his limited radicalism must have rapidly evaporated. It is hard to find evidence that any of it survived his ascent to high office.

Stefan

Notes

[1] Barack Obama, “Breaking the War Mentality,” *Sundial*, March 10, 1983 (politico.com/PPM116_obamaessay.html).

[2] One researcher has attributed an unsigned article on abortion to Obama. It suggests a generally pro-choice position.

[3] Phil Boerner, “Barack Obama ’83, My Columbia College Roommate,” *Columbia College Today*, January/February 2009 (college.columbia.edu/cct/jan_feb09/alumni_corner).

[4] A picture of the intellectual influences on Obama will have to be assembled from diverse sources. Most of them are undoubtedly mainstream. Thus, in an interview in spring 2007 Obama said that one of his favorite philosophers was Reinhold Niebuhr, the “theologian of the U.S. establishment” who insisted on the necessity of using power for “good” ends despite the sin and corruption that it inevitably entailed (Paul Street, *The Empire’s New Clothes*, pp. 180–2).

[5] Obama admits that *Dreams from My Father* is not completely accurate as an account of his life. He has changed people’s names, created some composite characters, and simplified the chronology here and there. Much more significant is what he chooses to put in and leave out.

[6] See Chapter 2 of *Dreams from My Father*. The crucial conversation between Barack and Lolo is on pages 38–41.

[7] Perhaps in recalling this conversation Obama is also reassuring himself.

[8] As this quotation suggests, Alinsky’s horizons appear to be confined to the United States.

[9] “In mass organization, you can’t go outside of people’s actual experience... You don’t communicate with anyone purely on the rational facts or ethics of an issue” (*Rules for Radicals*, p. 89).

[10] The document was also referred to as “Sessional Paper 10.” The minister who supervised its drafting was Tom Mboya, then one of the most prominent Kenyan politicians.

[11] The issue is available at politico.com/static/PPM41_eastafrica.html.

How Much is Obama Worth?

How Much is Obama Worth?

There is a certain prestige attached to being president of the United States. No doubt about it. But in capitalist society a person's "worth" is measured in money. From this point of view, Obama – like quite a few of the presidents who preceded him – is small fry.

Estimates based on Obama's 2009 tax return show his net worth as \$10,100,000 and his disposable annual income as \$3,200,000. He has a large but hardly palatial house, purchased in 2005 for \$1,650,000, in Hyde Park, a gentrified section of Chicago's South Side near the University of Chicago.

A long way from the top

This may seem big money to your average Joe. But consider: the United States has 403 billionaires, each of them worth at least 100 times as much as Obama. Five have fortunes in excess of 20 billion dollars – that is, at least 2,000 times the wealth of the president.

Obama is on the way up, to be sure, but he is still a long, long way from the top of the capitalist pecking order. Probably, like Bill Clinton, he will make a hundred million or so after leaving office on the after-dinner speech circuit. But even then he will be a long way from the top.

There are several dozen members of Congress wealthier than Obama. (The richest is Congressman Darrell Issa, Republican—California, at \$251 million.) Some of the members of Obama's administration are also worth more than him.

Why does all this matter?

Knowing what we do of the capitalist ethos, it must surely be *one* of the factors that shape the relationship between Obama and the real masters of the country. It helps explain why Obama, like many of his predecessors, behaves as their servant and feels unable to stand up to

them as an equal. In Obama's case, of course, an additional factor is at work – the deeply ingrained sense of vulnerability that comes of being a “black” man in a society that remains racist despite the temporary anomaly of a “*black*” family in the *White* House.

A helping hand?

Nevertheless, ten million dollars is much more than the vast majority of Americans – let alone of the world population -- can ever expect to possess. It is revealing to examine how Obama got that far.

Let's focus on the year 2006, when Obama was already an up-and-coming senator but had yet to declare his bid for the presidency. According to their tax return, the income of the Obama family that year was almost a million dollars (\$991,296 to be exact). Less than a sixth of that (\$157,082) came from Barack's official salary as a senator. Nearly a third (\$324,818) was paid to Michelle by two corporations in which she occupied senior management positions. The remainder – just over half (\$509,396) – came from various other sources, of which the most important was royalties on Barack's two books (published in 2005 and 2006, respectively).

Now let's take a closer look at Michelle's contribution to the family income. She received a salary of \$273,618 as vice president for community and external affairs at the University of Chicago Hospitals, plus \$51,200 as a paid member of the board of directors of TreeHouse Foods.

Why was she appointed to these positions? It is quite possible that these two companies wanted to benefit from her skills as a lawyer. But it is also quite possible that the bosses of these companies appointed her to reward Barack for services rendered in the Senate and/or ensure his future goodwill – to influence his stance on health reform, for instance.

The capitalists who sponsor a rising politician provide most of the money he needs to campaign for office and promote his image through the media. But often they also lend him a helping hand with his personal finances. They may do this by various methods, not all of them strictly legal. For example, the Clintons benefited from an inside tip to buy certain stock; later their enemies found out and used it against them.

Evidently, the helpful sponsor in these cases wants his client to feel

How Much is Obama Worth?

beholden to him not only for the success of his political career but also for the well-being and security of his family. For the corruption of a human being is more than a businesslike exchange of favors: it is a profound psychological, emotional, and intellectual process. And letting your protégé keep at least a small share of the loot for himself gives you an additional guarantee – should one be needed – of his loyalty to the system of capitalist exploitation as well as to you personally.

Stefan

On Health Insurance Reform

The issue of reforming the cruel and wasteful American health care system was central to Obama's presidential campaign – perhaps, indeed, the key to his election. On March 23, 2010, he finally signed into law the long-awaited Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Almost 2,000 pages long, it is an extremely complicated document, with numerous provisions on all sorts of health-related topics.

And yet when the hullabaloo died down, it seemed as though nothing in the real world had changed at all. One reason is that most of the Act's provisions and all of its *main* provisions (see Inset 1) do not come into force until 2014. We will then be legally required to buy health insurance. If we do not, we will be fined.

The reform seems to offer working people modest benefits. It promises to extend health insurance to most of those currently without coverage, the exceptions being illegal immigrants and people who defy the law and refuse to buy insurance. To make health insurance “affordable,” the government undertakes to repay part of the cost of premiums (for the poorest, the whole cost) through tax credits, on a sliding scale depending on income.

However, there will still be several grades of health insurance, ranging from “*de luxe*” at the top to “standard” and “basic” for those who can afford no better. Low-grade insurance does not provide much more security than having none at all. So a few million people will be transferred from the “no coverage” to the “poor coverage” category. Put this way, it seems a less impressive achievement.

Moreover, even people with the best health insurance are endangered by the system of for-profit healthcare, though in a different way. While people with poor or no coverage are often denied vitally necessary treatment, people with good coverage are urged to undergo unnecessary operations and tests that do more harm than good (for instance, by exposing them to radiation).

Obama has made much of the fact that the new law requires the insurance companies to give up certain abusive practices. No longer will they be

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act

Signed into law March 23, 2010

Summary of main provisions

1. Certain abusive practices by Health Insurance companies will be prohibited - in particular, denying coverage to people with pre-existing conditions, rescission, and imposing lifetime caps on benefits.
2. Health Insurance must cover preventive care, but not dental, visual, or reproductive services.
3. With some exceptions for people on low incomes, everyone must buy Health Insurance or else pay a fine of \$695 per person per year or 2.5% of income, whichever is greater.
4. Employers with over 50 employees must provide Health Insurance or else pay a fine of \$2,000 per employee per year.
5. The states will set up Health Insurance exchanges for the purchase of Health Insurance by people who are not covered by Medicare or Medicaid and who are not employed or whose employers do not provide Health Insurance.
6. Part of the cost of Health Insurance will be covered by tax credits on a sliding scale depending on income. Cost borne by consumers will not exceed 9.5% of their income.
7. Illegal immigrants will not receive any benefits.
8. Main provisions do not come into force until 2014.

What the law does not contain

1. A national Health Insurance exchange.
2. A public option as an alternative to private Health Insurance schemes.
3. Control over prices charged by Health Insurance companies (premiums, co-pays, and deductibles).
4. Lifting of the prohibition on importing prescription drugs.
5. Authorization for Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices.

Estimated cost to government = \$940 billion over ten years

allowed to refuse coverage to people with pre-existing conditions. For children this comes into effect immediately, for adults in 2014.

Another example is rescission, which means canceling a policy as soon as a major claim is made under it. The new law bans this practice. That certainly sounds like a very welcome advance. But rescission was *already* illegal, the only problem being that government regulators failed to enforce the ban. Why should we expect that they will now start to do so?

The real beneficiaries

The reform leaves in place the inhumane and perverse system of for-profit healthcare. Indeed, it entrenches that system even more deeply. It is a reform not of healthcare, but merely of private health *insurance*. The health insurance companies have made sure that *they* are the main beneficiaries of the new law. In exchange for a little more government regulation, they have been handed a greatly expanded captive market, subsidized and enforced by the government.

The second big winner is the pharmaceutical industry. Desperate to find a business interest that would give his reform public support, Obama struck a deal with Big Pharma. The drug companies agreed to sponsor TV ads in support of the reform, but they exacted a high price: Obama had to abandon efforts to save money at the expense of their monopoly profits. Breaking his campaign promises, Obama agreed not to allow Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices and to ban the import of cheaper drugs from Canada, Europe, and elsewhere on fraudulent safety grounds.

The public option (robust or otherwise)

Whatever happened to the much-touted “public option” that was to give us a meaningful alternative and make the private insurance companies face some real competition? Step by painful step, under unrelenting pressure from those same companies, Obama and all the congressional Democrats watered down and eventually abandoned any idea of creating new public health programs or expanding existing ones (see Inset 2).

Yes, *all* the congressional Democrats – including every single one of the 46 or 47 “progressives”¹ who – rightly arguing that no reform is better than an extremely bad one – had pledged to vote against a law that did not include a “robust public option.” When the party leadership demanded their support, they all caved in.

The posse was led by the president’s chief of staff Rahm Emanuel. Not all

On Health Insurance Reform

Retreating from Public Healthcare in Five Easy Stages

Obama's starting point

Speaking to the Illinois AFL-CIO in June 2003, when he was still only a state senator and did not yet realize that he had a chance of going for the presidency, Obama declared himself “*a proponent of a single-payer universal healthcare program.*”

Stage One of the Retreat: 2004 – 2008

During this period, Obama hedged and qualified his support for single payer without rejecting the idea in principle. He claimed that if he were designing a healthcare system “from scratch” he would set up a single payer system, but transition from the existing system to the new one would be disruptive. In *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), he argued that single payer was too left-wing to be politically feasible.

Stage Two of the Retreat: Summer 2009

Obama's position at this time was that he did not support single payer but was committed to a robust public option – that is, one available to anyone who wanted it – in order to guarantee universal access and “keep the insurance companies honest.”

Stage Three of the Retreat: September 2009

Under pressure from the insurance companies, which did not want to have to compete with a public option, Obama now shifted his support to a weak public option. This would be available only to the 5% of Americans currently ineligible for private health insurance and so would not compete with private insurance plans.

Stage Four of the Retreat: October 2009

Obama now shifted his support from a near-term public option of any kind to “the trigger” – that is, a provision for introducing a public option at some future date *if* the private insurance companies failed to meet certain (unspecified) targets.

Stage Five of the Retreat: December 2009

Obama finally abandoned all measures to expand access to public healthcare, including the “trigger” and a proposal to allow people aged between 55 and 64 years to “buy in” to Medicare.

of the rebels, however, were easy to discipline. Initially, for instance, Dennis Kucinich put up a stout resistance. So he was invited to join Obama on the presidential plane and won over by a personal appeal to help his friend Barack out of a tight spot. Kucinich had too much integrity to submit to bullying but was unable to withstand emotional manipulation.

Could there be more eloquent testimony to the futility of working for “progressive change” through the Democratic Party?

The farce of government regulation

What will be the practical effect of the government regulation imposed by the new law? It is too early to be sure, but here is a case study to think about.

The reform gives state governments some power over the level of insurance premiums. Premium hikes sought by a health insurance company in any state have to be approved by the state government, which can refuse to allow increases beyond a certain level. I investigated how the state in which I live (Rhode Island) is making these decisions.

What I discovered is a circular pattern. The responsible state commissioner decides on the basis of analyses commissioned from a research organization closely connected to the health insurance industry – owned, in fact, by a major health insurance company. The result is that government regulation merely enforces the norms already prevailing within the industry. A proposed hike is likely to be disapproved only if it is clearly excessive even in terms of industry norms.

Basically, the state government serves as a formal channel through which the insurance companies regulate themselves. This farce is already familiar from our experience with government regulation in other areas – notably, the corrupt relationship between Big Pharma and the Food and Drugs Administration.

Corporate lobbyists still supreme

During his campaign, Obama created the false impression that he would greatly reduce the influence of corporate lobbyists. In particular, he claimed that he was relying mainly on small donors, when in fact only a quarter of his funds came from people giving \$200 or less – about average for American politicians. He said that he was not accepting money from “Washington lobbyists” – omitting to add that he *was* accepting money from lobbyists at the *state* level (in Illinois, Florida, etc.) as well as from

On Health Insurance Reform

employees of Washington lobbying firms. He promised that he would not hire former lobbyists to work in his administration – and then did precisely that.

One of Obama’s campaign promises dealt specifically with the procedure that he was going to adopt for negotiating healthcare reform:

I'm going to have all the negotiations around a big table. We'll have doctors and nurses and hospital administrators. Insurance companies, drug companies -- they'll get a seat at the table, they just won't be able to buy every chair. But ... we'll have the negotiations televised on C-SPAN, so that people can see who is making arguments on behalf of their constituents, and who are making arguments on behalf of the drug companies or the insurance companies.

What happened? The crucial negotiations took place behind closed doors between corporate lobbyists and leading members of Congress. Insurance company representatives even exercised veto power over whose views could be presented at congressional hearings, almost completely keeping out the numerous advocates of replacing private health insurance by a national “single-payer” system.² Polls have consistently shown at least two thirds of both medical and public opinion in favor of such a system.

The context of austerity

We should not assume that the new law will actually be implemented, at least in its present form. The talk of our rulers and their hired experts has been more and more about “austerity” and, above all, the need to limit government spending and reduce deficits. Moreover, they intend to do this not by increasing taxation of the wealthy or by drastically cutting military expenditure, but at the expense of the “entitlements” of working people (social security, public pensions, etc.). At the G-20 summit in Toronto in June 2010, Obama and his fellow heads of state adopted a Declaration that stated: “The advanced economies have committed to fiscal plans that will at least halve deficits by 2013” – the year *before* the main provisions of the reform are supposed to come into effect.

In this context, a new expensive entitlements program in the field of healthcare seems highly anomalous. The law, if not abandoned altogether, will surely be amended with a view to large cost reductions. Especially if the route of saving money at the expense of the monopoly profits of the insurance and pharmaceutical industries remains blocked, cost reductions will have to be achieved by cutting back on the government contribution to the cost of premiums (which will have continued to rise rapidly in the

meantime). *Health insurance is therefore bound to remain beyond the means of many millions of working people.*

If despite this people are legally required to buy health insurance, there will be massive evasion of the law. Many people may refuse even to pay the substantial fines imposed for not having health insurance. Putting all these people in jail will hardly help to limit government spending. In any case, the reform will have failed in its ostensible purpose – ensuring “affordable care.” (Its real purpose – giving Obama what can be presented as a victory – has been achieved.)

Why not a national health service?

On the “left” of the healthcare debate are advocates of “real” or radical reform - either “single-payer” insurance run by the federal government, as in Germany, or a national health service, as in Canada and Britain. These systems have various defects, mostly arising out of the capitalist environment in which they operate, but at least they guarantee working people a basic standard of healthcare.

Despite the widespread popular and professional support for radical reform, these ideas and those who advocate them are systematically marginalized by the corporate media and business-dominated political system. Why should this be? After all, it is often argued, by socialists and others, that radical reform would be in the true interests not only of working people but of much of the American capitalist class (as opposed to sections of that class with a vested interest in the current healthcare system). The growing burden of healthcare costs on the economy would be brought under control, and companies would no longer have to contribute to employees’ insurance premiums. Companies in Britain and Canada, for instance, seem quite happy with the national health service in those countries.

So why does big business not promote real reform? This is the question that Doug Henwood explores in Issue No. 120 of his *Left Business Observer* (leftbusinessobserver.com).

Some analysts point to a “web of influence” – the interlocks (overlapping membership) between the boards of directors of insurance and other companies and the role of insurance companies as a source of finance for other companies. Henwood presents detailed evidence to show that these are not very significant phenomena.

Drawing on the testimony of researchers who have interviewed top executives on the issue, Henwood states that some (perhaps even many)

On Health Insurance Reform

executives support “single payer” in private but are reluctant to make their views public for two reasons.

First, they worry about the possible reaction of other firms with which they do business. Small companies especially are considered hostile to “single payer.” They do not stand to gain in terms of costs because they do not provide HI to their employees, while they would have to bear part of the additional tax burden. So they would see radical reform as an attempt to shift costs from big to small business.

Second, they are afraid of “encouraging would-be expropriators.” One informant puts it this way: *“If you can take away someone else's business - the insurance companies' business - then you can take away mine.”* Henwood adds that “employers like workers to feel insecure. Fear of losing health coverage makes workers less willing to strike or to resist pay cuts or speedups.”

So capitalists believe that a national health service would entail economic costs as well as benefits, while they view the elimination of private health insurance as a long-term political threat to their class rule. Whatever others may think they *should* think, they themselves do not think that a national health service would be in their interests. Otherwise we would have had one long ago.

Stefan

Notes

[1] Sources disagree on the exact number of the rebel Democrats.

[2] Participants in the American debate seem to assume that a national health service would completely displace private health insurance. This is not necessarily so. For example, the British health insurance company BUPA currently has over four million members. These are moderately affluent people willing and able to pay extra for higher quality service than is often available through the NHS. The really wealthy, of course, do not need insurance because they can always “pay as they go.”

Life's Unwitting Executioner

As I type this article on the failure of the Obama administration effectively to address our serious environmental crisis, 160,000 liters of petroleum are gushing out of two pipes to increase what are already 18 square kilometers of thick oil slick in the Gulf of Mexico. Among the most significant threats of this spill to the environment are the ruin of large segments of Louisiana's marshland and the probable destruction of the nurseries of fish and crustaceans that thrive along the coast. The deadly oil is also likely to kill off scores of larva, fish, plankton and mammal species.¹

This oil spill was entirely preventable and reflected President Obama's embrace of offshore drilling. He personally supported the repeal of the moratorium on offshore oil drilling² and has accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars in contributions from the oil industry.³

A few weeks since those words were penned and it is clear, as the oil makes its way along the Atlantic coast and into the ocean, that the Obama administration has presided over one the worst oil spills in history.

Bradford Plumer, assistant editor of the *New Republic* and its key environmental writer, has considered Obama's record on issues ranging from air pollution and the protection of roadless forests to the tearing apart of Appalachian mountains for mining "an outright disappointment."⁴ John McQuaid, the environmental writer for the *Washington Post*, has written powerfully on the Yale University website Environment360 of the devastating impact of blowing up the mountain tops in Appalachia. This practice, which continues apace under the Obama government (42 of 48 recent applications by mining corporations have been approved), destroys "headwater streams and surrounding forests, which are crucial to the workings of mountain ecosystems."⁵

Television reports and newspapers in May 2010 were full of news of this disaster, and humans were once again shocked at the destructive impact of our class society upon the delicate web of life. We have been through such emotional shocks a thousand times before.

Life's Unwitting Executioner

The reality is that such disasters are a common feature of urban capitalist society:

- The Dust Bowl of the 1930s, caused by excessive farming, affected a region of roughly 100,000,000 square miles.⁶
- The Chinese campaign against sparrows and other “pests” in the late 1950s exterminated a bird viewed as a threat to grain seeds, with the result that swarms of locusts, deprived of their natural predators, decimated crops across China, contributing to the starvation of some 45,000,000 people.⁷
- Oil spills have destroyed tens of thousands of square kilometers of wetlands along the Niger Delta⁸ as well as the unique ecosystem of the Caspian Sea.
- The oil sands (or tar sands) mining in the Alberta province of Canada has literally wiped life itself off the face of the planet over hundreds of square miles. Where there once stood a thriving boreal forest, there now stretches a bare moonscape for as far as the eye can see.⁹



Tar Sands mine in Alberta

These are but four of hundreds of examples from the past few decades of the most dramatic destructive acts upon the biosphere itself – acts that are simply part of business as usual. These are normal side effects of an industrial society bent on selling commodities that require massive expenditures of resources and energy to produce and distribute.

Cumulative effects

The problem with citing examples is that they may be perceived as tragic and horrendous ones, yes, but still, mere exceptions that can be avoided with more careful industry or government planning. More powerful still is an examination of the cumulative effects of our class society upon the biosphere, where a graver picture emerges, including such environmental traumas as:

- extensive industrial farming that has reduced the planet's topsoil from a few feet to on average of under an inch¹⁰
- a completely unsustainable throw-away model of consumption¹¹
- vast urban sprawl that has paved over unimaginably expansive areas of the planet
- deforestation at the rate of 13 million hectares a year¹²
- thousands of mountain tops completely removed by coal mining alone¹³
- nearly a thousand species rendered extinct each year from habitat degradation¹⁴
- the almost complete destruction of indigenous cultures¹⁵
- the loss of vast realms of coral reef (today approaching one third of the world's reef and rising) -- locations that themselves sustain life for one third of all planetary marine life.

Green Obama?

Many who voted for Obama as president in 2008 harbored hopes that he would be one of the greenest and most peace-loving candidates of all time. This was because he was elected partly on the basis of a series of environmental promises:

1. eliminating tax breaks for oil and gas companies;
2. introducing permanent tax credits for research into and production of renewable energy sources;

Life's Unwitting Executioner

3. expanding research into and development of clean coal technology, the next generation of sustainable biofuels, and wind, solar and nuclear energy;
4. encouraging farmers to be more energy efficient;
5. establishing a Global Energy Corps for older professionals to serve in encouraging greener production abroad;
6. creating five million "green jobs";
7. reducing dependence on foreign oil;
8. requiring 10 % renewable energy use by 2010; and
9. enacting windfall profit taxes for oil companies.¹⁶

Thus far in Obama's presidency, his record in keeping to these promises has been shoddy to moderate. However, the success or failure of a president's policies is often judged in insufficient terms. There is evidence that President Obama has sought certain environmental standards. For example, on December 15, 2009, agriculture secretary Tom Vilsack announced that his department will partner with dairy producers "to accelerate adoption of innovative manure-to-energy projects on American dairy farms" in an effort to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 25 %. Part of this proposal is to encourage the use of machines known as "methane digesters" that may better trap those gases produced by animals on factory farms for potential use in electricity production.

Obviously, this move does nothing to abolish the factory farm itself, reduce the many other negative effects of the factory farm, or bring the cows to pasture where they could graze upon healthy grass as nature intended. This would not only generate less methane but also allow the soil to decompose their manure by natural means. This is one example of how environmental laws tend to represent band-aid approaches that do more to beef up (pun intended) the green status of the law maker than help save the planet.¹⁷

The car culture lives on

To reduce dependence upon foreign oil, new rules were proposed in May 2009 and came into force on April 1, 2010, setting a fuel economy standard of 35.5 miles per gallon for cars and trucks, starting in 2016. Better fuel efficiency promises to save about 1.8 billion barrels of oil over the lifetime of the vehicles regulated under the new law. However, this would require people to buy new higher efficiency vehicles, doing

little to wean them off cars or move our society away from the car culture itself. This is made clear in another recent announcement that the Obama administration could increase the amount of oil produced domestically even further.

On March 31, 2010, President Obama said that he would be opening up new areas to drilling, though critics say that the amount of oil produced by new drilling will not be nearly enough to satisfy American demand for fossil fuels for very long. Thus, Obama is clearly trying to find a way to meet the popular demand for a reduction in fossil fuel use, but he is faced with the impossible task of also having to prop up a capitalist society that clearly requires the relatively untrammelled consumption of nonrenewable sources.¹⁸

The country faced gas prices over \$4 a gallon in the summer of 2008 when Obama (then a presidential candidate) pledged to support a proposal to tax the oil companies' windfall profits. In his words: "I'll make oil companies like Exxon pay a tax on their windfall profits, and we'll use the money to help families pay for their skyrocketing energy costs and other bills." Since then, gas prices have fallen back to \$2 or less a gallon. So this is a promise President Obama has not kept, but it also illustrates the lack of a true environmental vision for the country. Instead, we find a tendency to use his famous rhetoric as the short term demands, without a true plan for the future. According to Roger Blanchard of the Association for the Study of Peak Oil USA, peak oil has already been reached this year (2010): from now on the world's oil supplies will dwindle.¹⁹

Renewable fuels

On the campaign trail, Barack Obama made a lot of promises about renewable fuels, including one about producing 60 billion gallons of advanced biofuels by 2030. The Department of Energy is now in the process of raising the Renewable Fuel Standard, an existing mandate that requires gasoline to be blended with ethanol or diesel with biodiesel, from 9 billion gallons of blended fuel to 36 billion gallons by 2022. With the passage of the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007, the EPA is required to make these changes.²⁰

Under the new requirement, certain amounts of advanced biofuels and cellulosic ethanol - ethanol made from wood and grass, among other things - will be required every year. For example, by 2016 gasoline will be blended with 4.25 billion gallons of cellulosic ethanol and 7.25 billion gallons of advanced biofuels. Those amounts will increase in

Life's Unwitting Executioner

2017 to 5.5 billion gallons and 9 billion gallons, respectively. These new technologies, however, have raised serious concerns in the scientific community. For example, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists:

Several new studies have focused on the contribution of land use changes to lifecycle global warming pollution. If land is converted from forest to cropland, there can be a significant increase in global warming pollution. Recent estimates suggest that the emissions from these changes in land use may be huge and could dramatically shift the balance of risks and rewards for some kinds of ethanol. For example, when lifecycle analysis of corn ethanol includes land use changes caused by using corn for ethanol rather than food or animal feed, the lifecycle emissions can end up as high as gasoline or potentially much higher.²¹

I have provided these examples to illustrate how environmental decisions are made in a capitalist society. Because all production in a global market economy is geared to satisfying the profit needs of industry, valid concerns about the environment must be dealt with without sacrificing those key corporate values.

Mother Nature laid low

According to the materialist conception of history, technology, ideology, laws, culture, and social practices are ultimately shaped by the way in which humans produce the necessities of life. At present humans produce these necessities in a class society based on wage labor, which the owners of the means of life exploit to generate unpaid surplus for themselves. This primary economic and political relationship among members of our society, which is backed by the full force of the law, is what we socialists mean by capitalism. It is central to the understanding of current social problems.

Capitalism is also a system of production of commodities for their exchange value, which is realized through their sale. The logic by which capitalism functions, which is rarely questioned by those who try to understand our world, converts both the human and the natural world into exchange value. Life processes that are naturally governed by biochemical and nonlinear dynamic laws are subjected to an economic logic that does not exist in nature but has been created by humans and raised to the status of an ideological myth. Nature - once our magical, abundant, and spiritual mother - is reduced to the status of a mere thing to be used for production and wealth accumulation. Mother Nature, once deeply loved and revered, is laid low - a mere slab of flesh to rape and

devour.

Exchange value is an unnatural category superimposed upon use value and deceptively made to appear natural. For example, an apple is not just for eating, it is to be sold in the marketplace to yield a profit. Ecologists understandably mourn the degradation of body, soil, and the wider matrix of life resulting from the use of pesticides and fertilizers to grow an industrially produced apple, or the waste of water and energy and loss of biodiversity caused by industrial monoculture agriculture. But these destructive ways of feeding ourselves arise primarily because as a commodity the apple immediately ceases to be a means to satisfy my thirst and hunger (or indeed that of other creatures, or of the soil that it may fall upon if unpicked) and becomes a means to satisfy my thirst for profits - even if as a small farmer I make little money but must “feed my family” with the money I get from selling these apples!

Capitalism (whether in its statist or more free enterprise versions) is based on a gigantic sleight of hand by which the mountains, soil, plants, and animals – including humans! – lose their natural character and are forced to serve an imaginary value (exchange value), a god invisible to ordinary people but sanctioned by law and visible to the rich whenever they look at either us or our fellow plant and animal creatures.

And that is why President Obama has failed so miserably and will continue to fail in his pursuit of environmental objectives. As long as the primacy of the market replaces the primacy of nature as a core value, life itself will become subservient to this mad, murderous transformation of the entire organic and inorganic world to serve the requirements of Mammon.

Aspirations compromised, promises unfulfilled

Thus the sharp contrast between Obama’s actual environmental record as president and the laws and causes he supported as a senator from 2005 until his election as president in late 2008. During that period he backed the following policies:

- reforestation to improve carbon sequestration (July 2008);
- improving the mass testing of asbestos in Chicago housing projects (April, 2008);
- closing Yucca Mountain as a nuclear storage location (January, 2008);
- promoting green technologies and fuel efficiency standards

Life's Unwitting Executioner

(December, 2007);

- reducing mercury and lead contamination in communities to improve health (August, 2007);
- protecting the Great Lakes and National Parks and Forests (August, 2007);
- giving Katrina contracts to local firms instead of Halliburton (June, 2007); and

He also scored 60 % on the Humane Society Scorecard for animal protection (January, 2007).

Obama once spent three months working on a minority students' recycling project in 1996 while working as a civil rights attorney in Chicago and teaching constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School.²² So there is no question about where Obama's heart stood on environmental issues, and a wide range of ecologically concerned citizens voted for him in the hope of what he might do for the environment at the federal level.

However, these citizens did not understand to what extent all politicians must compromise their deep-seated aspirations once in office. They must bow to pressure from the capitalist class and cater to the full spectrum of capitalist economic interests. This was evident in the sorry story of Obama's health insurance reform (see the article on this topic).

People who vote for capitalist parties – that is, for any party, right or left, that undertakes to operate the market system, whatever its political ideology – fail again and again to appreciate this crucial fact. As a result, they are repeatedly disappointed when the promises of a candidate go largely unfulfilled.

The Anthropocene

In 2008 the Geological Society of London surveyed the human impact upon the earth as revealed by such phenomena as soil erosion, desertification, global warming, ocean acidification, major disturbances to the carbon cycle, and wholesale changes to plant and animal life. In recognition of the enormous scale of this impact, they dubbed this present geological era the Anthropocene.²³

An assessment of Obama's environmental record must also take into account the serious ecological impact of the wars waged under his command. He has escalated Bush's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and added almost constant drone bombing in Pakistan throughout 2009 and

2010. Barry Sanders, a Senior Fullbright Scholar, has provided detailed analysis to show that the U.S. military's contribution to environmental degradation and global warming is itself so devastating that even if we all started to bicycle, eat organic, and recycle today it would have no noticeable effect on the global environmental crisis.²⁴

Is it too late?

Our anxiety about the potentially escalating effects of global warming and the depressing reality that the fabric of life is coming apart at the seams lead us to wonder whether it is too late to reverse these trends. Certainly, our failure to abolish capitalism over a century ago, when socialist ideas were spreading among working people, allowed the factory system to expand into a global monster whose only purpose appears to be to gobble up life for its monetary hallucinations at a level of horror that was unimaginable in the past.

Ideally, the solution to the present environmental crisis is to transcend the politics of class and restore the profound feeling that complex life itself, possibly a phenomenon unique to our planet, is intrinsically of value. Its preservation must be considered an essential goal in and of itself, alongside the liberation of humans from wage slavery.

In the wise words of Karl Marx:

From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations as *boni patres familias*" [good heads of the household].²⁵

If it is not already too late to halt the catastrophe facing humankind, then we need to act now. We need to establish a democratic, moneyless, and stateless society that best suits humans. But it must also be a society that best suits all primates, the butterflies, the bees, the bats, and our million other cousins.

Dr. Who

Life's Unwitting Executioner

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Asteroid Wars

On April 15, in a speech at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, President Obama outlined plans for the U.S. space program. He rejected proposals to “return” to the moon in favor of a plan to develop by 2025 new spacecraft for manned missions into deep space. The first destination will be “an asteroid”, followed by Mars in the mid-2030s.

Why is an asteroid landing being given top priority?

Near-earth asteroids

Obama was certainly referring to one of the “near-earth asteroids” (NEAs). These are asteroids that have been dislodged, usually by the gravitational pull of Jupiter, from the main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter into orbits that approach or intersect the orbit of the earth. About 7,000 NEAs have been discovered so far. Some are known to be fantastically rich in valuable metals and other minerals. In fact, many metals now mined on earth originated in asteroids that rained down on our planet after the crust cooled.

Consider, for instance, the NEA known as 1986 DA. A mile and a half in diameter, it is estimated to contain ten billion tons of iron, one billion tons of nickel, 100,000 tons of platinum and over 10,000 tons of gold. The platinum alone, at the current price of 35 per gram, is worth 3.5 trillion. True, the price would fall rapidly once exploitation was underway, but at first the profits would be truly astronomical.

Given the scale of expected revenues, costs are unlikely to be prohibitive. Mining asteroids may even be more competitive than mining on the moon. Thanks to the very low gravity, a round trip to an NEA passing nearby will require less energy than a round trip to the moon. Processing might be carried out on site and only processed materials brought back to earth. True, a way will have to be found to “tether” machinery to the asteroid so that it does not drift off into space.

Asteroid Wars

Window of opportunity

Another problem with mining an NEA is that operations will have to be confined within a “window of opportunity” - that is, the few weeks or months when it is passing close enough to earth, for it may not return our way for many years to come (if ever). However, there is a way around this problem. Because NEAs are at most 20 miles in diameter, nuclear explosions can be used to change their course. This might be done if one were on a collision course with earth. (The Russian Space Agency is considering an attempt to deflect the asteroid Apophis, which has a tiny probability of hitting earth in 2036 or 2068.) A resource-rich NEA could be “captured” - that is, transported into earth orbit, where mining could continue for as long as it remained profitable.

Recalling Murphy’s Law (“If anything can go wrong, it will”), I shudder at the thought of the calamities that may descend on us from above as a result of accident or miscalculation.

An asteroid war?

For a socialist world community, mining asteroids might be an attractive option. It would offer not a supplement but an alternative to mining on earth, with its attendant ecological and work-related costs (costs in the sense of consequences running counter to communal values, as opposed to financial costs). Of course, a socialist world would have no use for the gold.

Under capitalism, however, the approach of a resource-rich NEA might well be an occasion for conflict between the U.S. and another space power (Russia, China or India), precisely because of the enormous profits at stake.

With adequate profit, capital is very bold. A certain 10 per cent. will ensure its employment anywhere; 20 per cent. certain will produce eagerness; 50 per cent., positive audacity; 100 per cent. will make it ready to trample on all human laws; 300 per cent., and there is not a crime at which it will scruple, nor a risk it will not run, even to the chance of its owner being hanged. (Marx quoting P.J. Dunning, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Ch. 31)

The use of celestial bodies remains unregulated by international law. There is a treaty designed for this purpose (the Moon Treaty of 1979),

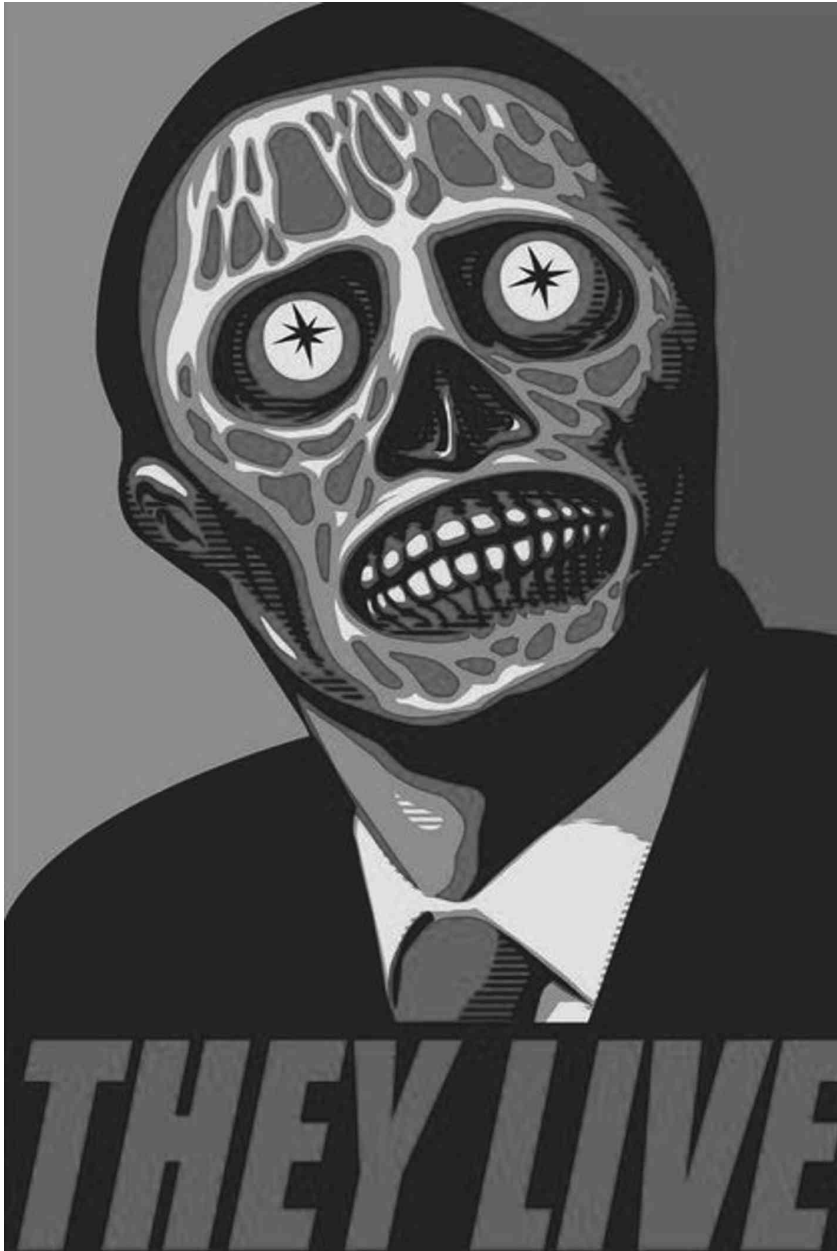
but it has never come into force because only a few states - not one of them a space power - have ratified it. An attempt in 1980 to get the U.S. Senate to ratify the treaty was defeated following lobbying by activists of the L5 Society, which was formed in 1975 to promote space colonization and manufacturing on the basis of private enterprise.

The danger of war over a resource-rich asteroid may well be greater than the risk of war over lunar resources. First, the moon is large enough to accommodate rival mining, processing and transport operations, but a small asteroid may not be. Second, an NEA will have to be exploited while it is within easy reach, so there will be little time for maneuvering, negotiations and the application of indirect pressure.

An asteroid war need not be waged openly. It is more likely to take the form of covert and deniable efforts to sabotage rival operations by various means (laser and other rays, radioelectronic warfare, etc.). Simultaneous attempts by different space/nuclear powers to capture an asteroid may have the unintended consequence of the asteroid hitting the earth.

Stefan

Asteroid Wars



Parody of Sci-Fi movie "They Live" theme.

Selecting a U.S. President: The Invisible Primaries

The expression “invisible primary” comes from Arthur T. Hadley, *The Invisible Primary* (Prentice-Hall, 1976). A more recent study refers to the “money primary” (Michael J. Goff, *The Money Primary*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). The two terms refer to the same process: the efforts of would-be candidates to gather support, raise funds, and cultivate the media in the year before a presidential election, before the “visible” primaries begin.

Charles Lewis, director of the Center for Public Integrity, defines the phenomenon as “a private referendum in which the wealthiest Americans substantially preselect and predetermine who our next president will be... The hottest candidate in the check-writing sweepstakes is deemed 'worthy' by the major media via hundreds of news stories... All others are dubbed losers before the first [public] votes are cast.”

This slightly overstates the case. There may sometimes be two candidates deemed worthy. But the great majority of would-be candidates are indeed thrown out. In the 2008 Democratic primaries, for example, the media and the pollsters gave serious recognition to only two of the seven candidates, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, with a clear bias in favor of Obama. A third candidate, John Edwards, received intermittent attention of a rather negative kind. The other four were more or less ignored.

Money and media coverage

So to get through the invisible primary you need two things: money and media coverage (lots of both). Let’s look at this a bit more closely.

Money and media coverage are closely connected – partly because money can buy media coverage in the form of political advertising,

Selecting a U.S. President: The Invisible Primaries

partly because (as Lewis notes) the media treat fundraising success as an important criterion of “credibility.” And also because both money and media coverage are allocated mainly by members of the same class, the capitalist class. They make most of the large financial contributions and some of them own and control the media.

This is not to say that money and media coverage are perfectly correlated. A candidate needs money for many other purposes besides media coverage, such as to hire staff, pay travel expenses, and bribe uncommitted convention delegates. Nor does media coverage depend solely on fundraising success. For instance, the bosses of Fox, CBS, and NBC also take into account candidates’ political positions when deciding who will be allowed to take part in televised “debates” (actually, grillings by TV journalists) and what questions, if any, each participant will be asked.

In terms of the analogy of a referendum of the capitalist class, it is a referendum in which the media owners have the casting vote.

The limits of the acceptable

What makes the political positions of a candidate acceptable or unacceptable to the media owners?

They would certainly regard any opposition to the capitalist system as unacceptable. But the limits are in fact much narrower than that. In order to pass the test a candidate must not convey an “anti-corporate message” or challenge any significant corporate interest. That means in effect that he or she cannot advocate any serious reform.

I reached this conclusion by observing what happened to the most “left-wing” of the Democratic candidates in 2008 – Dennis Kucinich, the Congressional Representative for Cleveland. Kucinich is not against capitalism, though unlike the general run of American politicians he appears to be independent of specific business interests. (As mayor of Cleveland he resisted pressure to privatize the city’s public utility system.) Like Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s, with whose tradition he associates himself, he aspires to “save capitalism from itself” by instituting long-overdue reforms. He was the only candidate to stand for a “single-payer” system of healthcare finance that would eliminate the parasitic health insurance companies. Similarly, he was the only candidate to challenge the military-industrial complex by calling for big

cuts in “defense” spending. These reforms are readily justified in capitalist terms, as essential to restore the competitiveness of U.S. civilian industry.

The media did their best to boycott Kucinich, except occasionally to ridicule him as a “kook” because, like Carter and Reagan, he says he once saw a UFO. The networks excluded him from TV debates, even when that required changing their own rules. (He sued NBC, but the courts upheld its right to exclude him.) As a result most Americans were unaware of his candidacy, although polls indicate that the policies he advocates enjoy wide support. In January he withdrew from the race, but has managed to hold onto his seat in Congress.

Confused, frustrated, underwhelmed

To get through the invisible and visible primaries, a candidate, especially if he or she is a Democrat, has to engage in vague and deceptive rhetoric. Obama and Clinton talked endlessly about change because that is what the voters to whom they appealed were looking for. They were fed up with seeing their children off to war, with layoffs, home foreclosures, and escalating health costs. Obama repeated the word “change” endlessly, turning it into a sort of religious mantra. But anyone trying to figure out what specific change he or Clinton stood for could count on being confused and underwhelmed. They would not have got through the invisible primary had they been determined on serious change.

The media relieve the strain and frustration of trying to assess and compare policy positions by distracting voters with trite pseudo-issues such as the relative merits of “youth” and “experience” and whether the U.S. is “ready” for a nonwhite or female president.

Socialists consider most of what passes for “democracy” in the U.S. and other “democratic” countries to be phony and corrupt – “the best democracy that money can buy.” But we do not deny the existence of some democratic elements in the political system of these countries, although their strength varies over time. One such element is the suffrage itself, which we hope will eventually play a role in establishing the fuller democracy of socialism.

Stefan

The Electoral College

Surprisingly few people in the United States realize that when they cast their vote on election day for U.S. President, their individual part of the “general will” passes through such a contraption as the Electoral College; that their vote is filtered through a device that enhances or devalues their vote, according to a formula corresponding to the number of people living in the state where they reside.

Americans at large, including those who actually register and vote, have been sold the idea of “one person, one vote.” That is what democracy means, right? But we do not live so much in a democracy, as in a representative republic. Our individual expression of the general will is strictly limited to the confines of the state where we live. Our votes only count to elect the real electors, namely the “representatives whose enlightened views and virtuous sentiments render them superior to local prejudice and schemes of injustice,” as James Madison put it.¹ To be fair, he was addressing representation in general, but just the fact that our vote is cast by a representative, shows the extent to which we are represented by these general representatives. And Madison has explained to us the primary reason for this state of affairs.

Under this system, the half million people living in Wyoming are assigned three electoral votes, regardless of the actual number of registered voters or number of votes cast. California’s population of 34 million people, meanwhile, is awarded 55 electoral votes. According to this formula California should carry 204. Things that make you go, huh?

This raises some obvious questions. First of all, why was the notion of an Electoral College even considered to begin with? And secondly, how did this undemocratic system come to be introduced?

As with the idea of representation, the main architect of the Electoral College was James Madison. Even though none of the reasons given for creating the Electoral College are still relevant today, the insidious institution lives on.

The Declaration of Independence was adopted July 4, 1776; enshrined

in the first paragraph we find: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness... That whenever any form of Government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.”²

Lofty ideals, no doubt, but rather hypocritical in a country where human beings were owned, bought, sold, kidnapped, traded and bred as slaves. Not a mention of slavery throughout this entire document - although, judging from its rhetoric, the rich men who signed the declaration seemed to have viewed themselves as the poor mistreated slaves of the King of England.

Later comes the Constitution of the United States, where, in Article I Section 2, the Electoral College is introduced. There the U.S. government accepts and sanctions slavery, through the vehicle of the Electoral College.

“At the Philadelphia convention [in 1787],” according to an essay published in the book *After the People Vote*, “the visionary Pennsylvanian James Wilson proposed direct national election of the president.”³ Pennsylvania, incidentally, was a free state.

The Virginian James Madison, however, suggested in an important July 19 of that year, that the direct election would be unacceptable to the South, based on the idea that, “the right of suffrage was much more diffusive in the Northern than in the Southern states; and the latter could have no influence in the elections on the score of Negroes.”⁴

Madison realized that the South would be at a disadvantage in a direct election, outnumbered as it was by the North. Moreover, the more than half a million slaves in the South at the time had no vote, needless to say. However, introducing the Electoral College, which Madison sketched out in that same July speech, would allow each Southern state to calculate its share of the electoral vote by including their slave populations (although calculating each as two-fifths of a regular citizen).

This approach allowed Virginia in particular to benefit. After the 1800 census, even though Pennsylvania had 10% more people than the free population of Virginia, it received 20% fewer electoral votes because of the large slave population in that southern state. Under the system, in

The Electoral College

other words, the more slaves bought and bred in a state where slavery was legal, the more electoral votes that state would receive. Not only was there thus an incentive to increase the slave population, there was little motivation to free slaves, for those who moved to the North could contribute to the loss of electoral votes in the South.

It is not hard to see that the introduction of the Electoral College not only amounted to a recognition and sanctioning of slavery, but also promoted it.

It can be contested by the hoi polloi but the Civil War was not fought to abolish slavery but to ensure that the two economies developing on this continent remained together under the umbrella of a single government. The North did a hostile take-over of the South in a corporate sense.

Surely the scales have fallen from any blind eyes; let anyone who has eyes to see look upon the rotten root from which the Electoral College has grown.

H J 109 I H was proposed by Senator John Conyers, et al, to the 108th Congress October 8, 2004. It said in part:

JOINT RESOLUTION

Proposing an amendment to the Constitution of the United States to provide for direct election of the President and Vice President by the popular vote of all the citizens of the United States of America regardless of place of residence.

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled (two-thirds of each House concurring therein), That the following article is proposed as an amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which shall be valid to all intents and purposes as part of the Constitution of the United States when ratified by the legislatures of three-fourths of the several states:

Article -

SECTION 1. The President and Vice President shall be elected jointly by direct vote of the citizens of the United States, without regard to whether the citizens are residents of a State.

Section 1 of this Joint Resolution would indeed be a huge step forward

toward our goal of equality and justice. Section 1 would involve what has been known in times past as the Dangerous Class in being able to determine their destiny right along with the rest of us. This section would enfranchise those most victimized citizens, the destitute and homeless.

Joe Hopkins

Notes

[1] James Madison, writing in The Federalist #10, cited in The Declaration of Independence and Other Great Documents, John Grafton, Editor (Dover Publications, 2000), p. 41

[2] Grafton, Supra, op. cit., 6-7

[3] Akhil Reed Amar and Vikram David Amar, "Why Old and New Arguments for the Electoral College Are Not Compelling," cited in Max Farrand, ed. The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787 for this point, 1: 68-9 The Amars' essay is cited in John C. Fortier, Editor, After the People Vote: A Guide to the Electoral College (A.E.I., 2004), pp. 58-59.

[4] Farrand, ed., op.cit., 1:56-57

The Politics of the “Lesser Evil”

Many well-meaning and “progressive” people urge us to support one of the two main capitalist parties, the Democrats, on the grounds that they are a “lesser evil” than the Republicans. One example is film maker Michael Moore. Another is Paul Street, who has written two useful books about Obama and his record.¹ Although Street calls himself a libertarian socialist, he campaigned for Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards.

What they say *versus* what they do

How much less evil, then, are the Democrats?

A mistake that voters often make, especially during election campaigns, is to compare what the Republicans *say* and *do* with what the Democrats *say*. The relevant comparison is with what the Democrats *do*. The trouble is that when the Democrats have been out of office for a few years most voters no longer remember what they do. But those familiar with the record of the Clinton administration in the 1990s, for instance, or with Obama’s record as a congressman, might have noticed that between what the Democrats say and what they do yawns a chasm wider than the Grand Canyon.

In stump speeches in the mid-West, candidate Obama thundered against regional companies such as Maytag and Exelon. And yet these same companies, justifiably confident that he would do nothing to harm their interests, made large financial contributions to his campaign. Speaking before audiences of workers, Obama would denounce Maytag’s decision in 2004 to close the refrigerator plant in Galesburg, Illinois, entailing the loss of 1,600 jobs to Mexico. But he never raised the issue with Maytag directors Henry and Lester Crown, even though he enjoyed a “special relationship” with them.

Differences that make no difference

Many of the “differences” between Bush and Obama (or between McCain and Obama) make no difference. Or very little.



Art Young, *The Masses*, 1916

Obama initially opposed Bush’s military intervention in Iraq – hastening to add that he was not against all wars, God forbid, but only against “dumb” ones. Before leaving office, Bush initiated a gradual and partial withdrawal of troops from Iraq. Obama is pursuing the same course, breaking an earlier promise of rapid and complete withdrawal.

Bush was heading toward war with Iran.² Obama is not. Probably. Hopefully. True, he did back off from his promise to meet with Iranian leaders. Commentator Steve Clemons informs us that “while there are

The Politics of the “Lesser Evil”

individuals in the Obama administration who are flirting with the possibility of military action against Iran, they are fewer in number than existed in the Bush administration” (*The Huffington Post*, July 23, 2010). How’s that for reassurance?

Before the election, there seemed to be several very clear-cut differences between Obama and the Republicans on issues regarded as important by large numbers of voters. And yet these differences proved illusory.

One of these issues was torture. Many supported Obama in the expectation that he would halt the shameful practice of torturing people detained, often on the flimsiest grounds, in Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere on suspicion of “terrorism” – a crime taken to include any resistance to U.S. occupation forces. There is now abundant evidence that torture has continued on a large scale in Afghanistan – for example, at the notorious Bagram jail – as well as Iraq.³

Offshore drilling for oil was another such issue. How many people must have voted for Obama in horrified response to the exultant cry of John McCain and Sarah Palin: “*Drill, baby, drill!*” Then in March 2010 Obama broke his campaign pledge and gave the go-ahead to offshore operations over large areas. The very next month an oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico. Another rig caught fire in September.

Obama won trade union support by promising a new law to facilitate union organizing – the Employee Free Choice Act. He also said he would renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement to include stronger labor and environmental protections. We have heard nothing more of these things. Obama, we are told, does not want to look “pro-labor.”

And so the sad litany continues.

Obama and “black” people

There is one group to whom Obama made no promises – “black” people. He didn’t need to promise them anything, because with few exceptions they were happy to support him just for being – more or less – one of them. *He himself* was the promise, you might say. He promised them nothing and gave them nothing. He reckoned that to win the “white” support he needed he must not even give voice to the grievances of “black” people, let alone do something to address them. Only then

might he escape the terrible fate of being labeled an “angry black man” by the corporate media.⁴

Does it help “black” people to have a “black” family in the White House? It does not help them in any practical way – for instance, in breaking down the residential segregation that persists in most areas of the country. Any effects are purely psychological. No one who witnessed the emotional reaction of most “black” people to Obama’s triumph can deny that it enhanced their self-respect and in general made them feel better. That is no small thing. On the other hand, the fact of a “black” president gives “white” people an excuse to claim that racism is no longer a problem in America, which is at best a self-delusion. Psychological effects are hard to weigh up. Perhaps, on balance, they cancel one another out.

A political cycle

I do not mean to deny that in some ways or in some situations it *may* be better to have a Democrat rather than a Republican in the White House. For instance, isn’t it worthwhile just to reduce, even if not eliminate, the probability of an attack on Iran?

For the sake of argument, let us suppose that the Democrats *are* a significantly lesser evil. In that case, helping them into office does ward off a greater evil. But only in the short term. For once in office, Democrats come under irresistible pressure from their capitalist masters to break their “populist” promises, to disappoint, disillusion and betray the working people who placed their trust and hope in them. Some sink back into apathy and despair, while others fall prey to a racist or fascist backlash. These reactions give the Republicans their chance to return.

This is a recognizable political cycle. We have been through it before. Over and over again. Not only in the United States but (with variations of detail) in many other countries. Those who support the lesser evil play an essential role in constantly reproducing the cycle. They share the responsibility for its persistence. Support for the lesser evil also entails support – indirect and delayed, but support nonetheless – for the greater evil.

A two-phase strategy

To be fair, supporting Democratic politicians as a lesser evil is only part

The Politics of the “Lesser Evil”

of the political strategy advocated by Street and those who think like him – Phase One in a two-phase strategy. Phase Two, which they say is equally important, is to build popular movements (against war, for action on behalf of the environment, for civil rights, etc.) strong enough to put effective pressure on Democrats once elected. This pressure is supposed to neutralize the pressure exerted by capitalist lobbyists and force Democratic politicians to deliver on their promises.

The problem with this strategy is the extreme difficulty of combining the two phases, which have contradictory requirements. To campaign effectively for a candidate you have to conceal your reservations and simulate some real enthusiasm for him or her. You cannot knock on people’s doors and tell them: “To be honest, none of the candidates are much good. None of them can be trusted. My candidate isn’t so great either. But he isn’t quite as bad as the others, on some issues anyway.” This is how Street justifies his support for Edwards in his first book, but you can bet that he didn’t talk that way on the campaign trail!

Let us suppose that “your” candidate gets elected. Time to switch to Phase Two. You go back to people and tell them: “We got our candidate elected. But now we have to organize and demonstrate and kick up a huge fuss, otherwise he’ll do nothing for us. We can’t trust these politicians, you know!” The likely response is: “What the hell! Only last month you were telling us how great this guy is. What sort of game are you playing?”

Before very long, new congressional or presidential elections are in the offing. Time to switch back to Phase One.

Wouldn’t we be doing more to enhance the long-term prospects for progressive change if we were honest with people and consistently told them the score as we see it?

The difference that matters

For us as earthlings, the difference that matters is that between socialism and capitalism. Will we continue on our present course to the irreversible destruction of our home world? Or will we make the fundamental change needed to give us a decent chance of survival?

From this perspective, the differences between “greater” and “lesser” evils do not matter. Some capitalist politicians are totally subservient to

the oil, gas, and coal corporations and recklessly oblivious to the looming danger. In their hands we are doomed. Other capitalist politicians are a little less subservient, show a limited awareness of the situation, and try to do something to mitigate it. This is something, but much less than is absolutely essential. In their hands we are still doomed.

Pass or fail. The “lesser evil” is simply not good enough.

Stefan

Notes

[1] *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics* (2009) and *The Empire's New Clothes: Barack Obama in the Real World of Power* (2010) (both from Paradigm Publishers).

[2] See “Iran in the Crosshairs,” *Socialist Standard*, January 2008, p. 6 (worldsocialism.org/spgb/jan08/page6.html).

[3] Several former detainees who had been interrogated at Bagram testified to having been tortured in 2009 and 2010, after the Obama administration claimed that torture had stopped (Mike Ludwig, truth-out.org, October 15, 2010). Wikileaks has made available a complete set of situation reports filed by soldiers in Iraq over the period 2004 – 2009; they reveal that all the abusive practices prevalent under Bush have continued under Obama.

[4] His wife Michelle, not always as self-restrained as Barack, has not escaped being labeled an “angry black woman.” But “white” people are not so frightened of “black” women.



Unemployment – Is It Really the Problem?

Unemployment – Is It *Really* the Problem?

Is unemployment *really* the problem?

Don't get me wrong. I don't want to play down the misery of the millions who have lost their jobs – or the millions more who are going to lose their jobs – as the world slides deeper into the next Great Depression. I know very well what losing your job so often means. Losing your home (well, you *thought* it was yours!). Losing medical coverage (if you had it). Even losing your family.

But think. If not being employed was really the problem, wouldn't you expect *everyone* without a job to be in misery? But there are many people who don't have jobs and yet live well enough. People who don't *need* jobs.

Native people in the Amazon rainforest, for so long as they manage to preserve their old way of life, don't need jobs. They have access to land, food, wood, medicinal herbs, other resources they need – to their *means of life*. When the logging and mining companies move in, they lose access. Sure, *then* they need jobs.

Most of us in the “developed” countries lost access to the means of life long ago. They no longer belong to us. They were seized by a small minority who claim to own them. These owners allow us access to things we need only in exchange for money. If we can't pay, they would sooner have things go to waste – sooner leave houses empty, for instance, than shelter the homeless. They allow us access to productive resources only when they hire us to work for them. If we try to get access without their permission, they call us criminals and send their police and jailors to punish us.

These people – the employers, the owners of the means of life – are unemployed, every one of them. But it doesn't bother them a bit! They live on the income from their property. They too don't need jobs.

So unemployment is a problem *only* for people who depend on being

employed in order to live. That situation of dependence is what I mean by the *real problem*.

Some of us try to escape from the situation of dependence by going into business for ourselves. But chances of success are small – even in good times, let alone during a slump. Many don't seek escape at all but appeal to the government to create more jobs, hoping to go back to slaving away for others.

We socialists don't appeal for jobs. We don't want jobs. That doesn't mean we're lazy! We thirst for the opportunity to do useful work as free, equal, and dignified human beings – work to satisfy our needs and the needs of others. We want to be rid of an absurd system that artificially creates misery and wastes vast material, natural, and human resources. That is why we demand restoration of access to the means of life – their common ownership and democratic control by the whole community

Stefan

Waste and Want

How Capitalism Destroys Useful Things

Open any economics textbook and it will explain to you how “the market” uses price signals to maximize consumer welfare. Such an ingenious, flexible, smoothly functioning mechanism!

And yet everyone knows that the reality is quite different. The business cycle of boom followed by slump has always been an essential feature of capitalism. Marx analyzed this cycle in the nineteenth century and his analysis is still of value today.

It is during depressions that we most clearly see the ugly face of this perverse, wasteful, and cruel system. It is during depressions that the contrast between unmet needs and wasted potential is most glaring. And most glaring of all when capitalists deliberately destroy useful things that people desperately need – food, newly built houses, clothes, bedding, and so on.

Grapes of Wrath

In Chapter 25 of his great novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck eloquently described how masses of good food were destroyed during the Great Depression, before the very eyes of the hungry:

Carloads of oranges dumped on the ground. The people come for miles to take the fruit, but this could not be. How would they buy oranges if they could drive out and pick them up? And men with hoses squirt kerosene on the oranges... A million people hungry, needing the fruit – and kerosene sprayed over the golden mountains.

And the smell of rot fills the country.

Burn coffee for fuel in the ships... Dump potatoes in the rivers and

place guards along the banks to keep the hungry people from fishing them out [with nets]. Slaughter the pigs and bury them...

And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates – died of malnutrition – because the food must be forced to rot.

In 1933 alone, the federal government bought six million hogs and destroyed them. Vast quantities of milk were poured down the sewers. 25 million acres of crops (the area of a square with sides 200 miles long) were plowed under. In Brazil, 69 million bags of coffee, equivalent to two years' output, were destroyed. All to keep up prices.

That was the 1930s. What about this time round?

The current depression is the deepest since the Great Depression, and despite short-term fluctuations its end is not yet in sight. As real wages continue to fall and austerity measures bite harder, more and more goods will remain unsold. Falling prices and profits are already leading to scenes reminiscent of those portrayed by Steinbeck.

Leaving strawberries to rot

In March 2010, reports appeared that Florida strawberry growers, faced with a flooded market and a sharp collapse in wholesale prices, were leaving huge tracts to rot in the fields. Most of these farmers did not allow people in to pick fruit for themselves. They were afraid that cucumbers and other new crops they were planting between the rows might be harmed.¹

Meanwhile, the proportion of people in the United States who suffer from serious malnourishment and intermittent hunger has risen to 15 % (for children – 25 %).²

Bulldozing houses

About three quarters of a million people are homeless in the United States on any given night. Many millions of others are forced to live in overcrowded or substandard housing.³ And yet there have been reports from around the country of the destruction of houses, many of them newly built.

Waste and Want

Most foreclosed houses⁴ can no longer be sold at auction, even for prices as low as \$500. They end up in the hands of banks that see no medium-term prospect of reselling them and conclude that the cheapest solution is to tear them down. This happens not only to individual houses but often to whole streets. In May 2009, a bank decided to bulldoze an almost finished housing complex in California rather than spend the few hundred thousand dollars needed to complete it.

Meanwhile the ranks of the homeless continue to swell. They are in desperate need of housing but generate no “effective demand”.

Slashing clothes and shoes

In early January 2010, *The New York Times* ran a story about two major retail chains, H&M and Wal-Mart, throwing out unsold clothes in trash bags. First they are made unwearable: employees are told to slash garments, slice holes in shoes, cut sleeves off coats, fingers off gloves, etc.

The response to this article included internet testimony from ex-employees of other large stores, revealing how widespread these practices now are.

Cheryl: “I worked at Dillards for several years. They do the same thing. Their logic was that if they donated it [to charity] people would try to bring it back to exchange for other merchandise.”

Martha: “Yeah, I used to work at a store where they would rip the bed sheets, blankets and pillow cases if they couldn’t sell them, then throw them away... I thought it was dumb. I wanted to take it and donate it, but they didn’t let me.”

Nat: “I used to work for H&M and hated to cut the clothing [that] I knew we could have given away to those who needed it. We destroyed EVERYTHING and I found it so stupid. It was such a waste and sad!”

Maryliz: “This just makes me sick. How terrible, especially right now with people freezing to death. They could have been saved if they had sufficient warm clothing. Shame on the companies that do this.”

Maggie: “I got so mad that my managers wouldn’t box up [unsold food] and take it to shelters that I called corporate headquarters... They

wouldn't let the food be donated! Some blather about how that would devalue the brand, because people would just go to that shelter to eat the food instead of coming and paying for it.”

The vintage

Steinbeck finishes Chapter 25 with the passage that gives his book its title: “In the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.”

There is ample cause for wrath. But wrath is not enough. The managers who got Maggie so angry have to act as they do. (Otherwise they won't remain managers.) The things that Maggie and the others naively see as use values they have to view solely as potential exchange values. They have to pursue the commercial logic of maximizing profit or minimizing loss. The idea of giving people what they need, simply because they need it, is inconsistent with this logic. It expresses a different, human logic, which will come into its own once we reorganize society on a different, human basis.

Stefan

Notes

[1] Not only the strawberries went to waste but also the water used to grow them. Cultivation of the wasted strawberries drained the groundwater and caused local water shortages.

[2] These figures are for 2008 and refer to people whose “food security” is judged to be “low” or “very low.” They consume diets poor in protein and vitamins and live in households that run out of food toward the end of each month.

[3] Figures are again for 2008. How many are “homeless” depends on the definition used. There are about 310,000 “unsheltered homeless,” who live and sleep on the streets or in other places unsuited for human habitation. When we include families who no longer have their own homes and live in “doubled up situations” – usually with relatives – the number of homeless reaches 4.5 million (1.5 % of the population). Homelessness, however defined, is now sharply on the rise due to the increasing number of “99ers” – people who have been unemployed for over 99 weeks and so are no longer eligible for unemployment benefits.

[4] More American homes were repossessed by banks in August 2010 – over 95,000 – than in any other month in history. Economists expect a total of 1,200,000 bank repossessions in 2010 (as compared with 100,000 in 2005).

Is There a Cure for Economic Crises?

Is There a Cure for Economic Crises?

The March/April 2009 issue of *The Gainesville Iguana* reprinted an article by Professor Fred Moseley from *Dollars & Sense* entitled “Time for Permanent Bank Nationalization.” Mosley states that “nationalizing the biggest banks will help ensure that a crisis like this never happens again.”

Economic crises are chronic under capitalism and can have many causes. Anyone who thinks s/he has found the cause of any economic crisis probably needs to think again. Socialists see an economic crisis or “credit crunch” as merely part of a business cycle. These cycles of economic distress are so chronic that they have proved to be a fundamental part of capitalism itself.

A contradiction-ridden system in which a tiny minority of owners benefits at the expense of the vast multitude of wage earners simply cannot run smoothly or efficiently for long because of that conflict between capitalists and workers. In the interest of profit, the capitalists are driven to pay workers the lowest wage sufficient to keep them in adequate shape to work. But workers, who are the true producers of all wealth under capitalism, want high wages! This is class conflict - the central contradiction of the capitalist system.

Since at least 1892, this conflict between the desire for profit and the desire for higher wages was thought to be one of the main causes of the Great Depression that struck England at the time. (Yes, they had a Great Depression, too.) This was the so-called theory of underconsumption.

This theory was inspired by a group of capitalist economic reformers known as the “Social Credit Movement,” led by Major C. Douglas, who developed the idea that banks could create credit “with the stroke of a pen” at no cost to themselves through their alleged power to create multiples of credit from a given deposit base.

The argument ran that overproduction was the result of insufficient

“effective demand.” Capitalism does not recognize “need” as such - only effective demand, or, more plainly, the ability to pay. (A major distinction between capitalism and socialism is that under capitalism, what drives production is profit, whereas in socialism production is for the satisfaction of human needs.) It was concluded that capitalism would die as a result of stagnation if the workers as consumers could not afford to buy all the commodities brought to market.

But capitalism did not die. The Great Depression of 1892 wreaked havoc on the working class as industries cut back on production by laying off workers, leading to soaring unemployment. (Sound familiar?) Workers froze, starved, and died -but capitalists did not perish, nor did the capitalist system.

Socialism has been called unworkable and utopian because it is a moneyless system in which there can be no “economic calculation” to govern allocation of labor or resources to their most productive uses. This argument assumes capitalism to be an efficient system with little waste, operating in an orderly fashion. If this were true, how can we account for the periodic crises accompanied by overproduction, underconsumption, inflation, unemployment, and all their related ills?

Socialism is not some hare-brained scheme dreamed up yesterday. The “economic calculation” argument against socialism was refuted back in the early 1920s by theorists who put forward the alternative of “calculation in kind.” A clear formulation of calculation in kind was presented by the Guildford Branch of the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB) in October 1982:

It is perfectly possible to calculate “costs” without resorting to prices and this is done all the time today: how much energy does this process assume per unit of output compared with another; which strain of wheat yields greater output; does this product use up more of a particular resource spread over the lifetime of the product than a comparable product; is the productivity of workers sorting mail by hand more or less than in the case of automatic sorting, taking into account the labour embodied in the machinery used.¹

“Economic calculation” is merely the demented offspring of the capitalist market system. As Perrin puts it, “the real function of economic calculation in the market system is not to facilitate the practical, technical organisation of production; it is ultimately about

Is There a Cure for Economic Crises?

calculating the exploitation of labour through ascertaining which method of production procures the greatest monetary profit.”

There are two main reasons - both human rather than economic - to prefer socialist production for need and use-value over capitalist production for profit.

First, people who lack money still need food, clothing, shelter and health care (not health insurance) even when the capitalist system has no jobs on offer and companies are dumping grain into the ocean because there is no “effective demand” or hospitals are refusing to treat the ill because of their inability to pay.

Second, this world is the only one we have. It is not just a storehouse of raw materials to be exploited for as much monetary profit as possible while destroying the ecosystem, polluting the lakes, streams, oceans and air, and driving a multitude of creatures into extinction each year by poisoning and destroying their natural habitat.

This world is our home. And even more important for any ethically minded person: it will be home to our children, grandchildren, and their descendants. Let us decide together to not allow this planet to be ruined by the greed of the minority capitalist class.

Socialism is the only cure for economic crises!

Joe Hopkins

Note

[1] David Perrin, *The Socialist Party of Great Britain: Politics, Economics and Britain's Oldest Socialist Party*, Bridge Books, 2000.

The Gift of Blood

I lived the early part of my life in Britain, emigrating to the U.S. when I was about 40. While in Britain I regularly donated blood. When I came to the U.S. I continued giving blood, but after two or three donations decided to stop. The experience was no longer a source of satisfaction to me. I'd like to explain why.

In *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy* (1970, reissued 1997), Richard Titmuss described the voluntary donation of blood as “institutionalized altruism”: “[It] represents the relationship of giving between human beings in its purest form, because people give without the expectation that they will necessarily be given to in return.”

However, the concept of “altruism” does not quite capture the appeal of giving blood – at least, not for me. The altruist, unlike the egoist, gains satisfaction from giving to others. But the altruist still perceives those “others” as separate from his or her self, and consequently experiences giving as a loss. In these respects, the altruist and the egoist are alike. The only difference between them is that the altruist gains sufficient moral satisfaction from the giving to outweigh the loss, so that on balance the experience is a rewarding one.

For me, the essence of giving blood in the context of the British National Health System was not altruism but the sense of participating in a community. Members of a community give not to “others” -- perceived as separate from the self – but to the *community*, perceived as an overarching entity that encompasses both self and others. In that sense, they give to another, broader aspect of the self, and do not experience the giving as a loss. Nor, for that matter, do they experience it as a gain, but rather as a transfer from one aspect of the self to another. Giving to the community is experienced more as egoism (of a special kind) than as altruism.

Whenever I gave blood in Britain, I was brought to sit and rest afterward with other donors in a special area where nurses gave us all biscuits and tea, to replace the lost fluid, and made sure that each of us felt well before leaving. When I gave blood in the U.S. there was none of this.

The Gift of Blood

True, we were free to continue lying down for a while after the blood was extracted, but no one asked how we felt or offered us anything to eat and drink. And this was why I stopped giving blood.

Of course, I could easily have solved the practical problem by taking a beverage with me and finding a spot nearby to drink it. However, it was not the practical problem that prompted my decision. Rather, the indifference shown to our welfare as donors brought home to me the fact that here in the U.S., where there is no health service for everyone, I was no longer participating in a community by giving blood. In Britain, I had given my blood without payment in the knowledge that a patient who needed it would likewise receive it without payment. Here, although I was giving my blood for free, the patient would still have to pay for it. That made of me a sucker, seduced into contributing to the profits of some medical business.

From a very informative article by Joel Schwartz,¹ I learn that it is in fact common practice in the U.S. to offer blood donors fruit juice and cookies. I suppose I was just unlucky in that respect. The author also suggests that the fruit juice and cookies might be regarded as a sort of “payment” given in exchange for the blood.

For blood given in the context of a community, this is an absurd interpretation. Giving blood to the community weakens you, so you then receive sustenance from the community until your strength is restored. In the first instance you give, in the second you receive, but there is no exchange involved whatsoever. You are helping to look after others, but at the same time you are being looked after – as a matter of course, because you are part of the community. After all, if you need sustenance for a reason that has nothing to do with an act of giving on your part, you will still receive it. Giving and receiving arise not in response to one another, but out of participation in the community.

Stefan

Note

[1] “Blood and altruism – Richard M. Titmuss’ criticism on the commercialization of blood,” *Public Interest*, Summer 1999 (findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0377/is_136/ai_55174702).

Two Petrarchan Sonnets

Written on the Eve of Midterm Elections

In oh-oh-8 Obama's hope a-spread
"It might get better, or less bad perchance,
A time to stop that crawl and learn to dance"
We thought in weary longing, underfed.
So up! we stood, and off away were led
To move at last, the thrill, the swift advance!
To think as one, the ecstasy of trance
In thrall to Barack, feet and heart and head

Two years are gone, alas, and so is hope
A-shriveled, lost in faraway Iraq
Not "yes we can" but "sure as hell we can't"
So muddled lib'ruls desperately cope
Whilst brain-dead tea-bags mount a strange attack
But who's for pulling out the money plant?

Mike

Ah! Once Obama's Hope spread far and wide
Benumbèd minds awoke from their trance –
To crawl no more! And learn the way to dance!"
And wearied eyes in wonderment descried
Th' approach at last of Change's rising tide,
In motion now, the thrill of fast advance,
We hail the blessèd* herald, Hist'ry's Chance!
A politician, yes! but on our side.

Alas, he lied and lied and lied and lied...
A trillion bucks all for his banker friends.
While for their dupes, foreclosèd – not a cent!
He sends them mis'erable away, to bide
Among the homeless, 'til the system ends.
It's time the Money Madness up and went!

Stefan

* Note. "Barack" is Arabic for "blessed" (like Baruch in Hebrew).

10 Good Reasons Why We Are Fighting in Afghanistan

1. We are fighting in Afghanistan because we are *loyal Americans*. We have unquestioning trust in the wisdom of our leaders.
2. We are fighting in Afghanistan because we are devoted to the principles of *free trade* and *free enterprise*. That is why we want to protect the heroin export business of President Karzai's brother and other Afghan warlords against interference and unfair competition by the Taliban.
3. We are fighting in Afghanistan because we want to secure the route for a pipeline to pump vast quantities of *natural gas* from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India.
4. We are fighting in Afghanistan because we need *stability* there. We need stability to prevent the disruption of free enterprise (especially for the sake of Reason 3). Previously we backed the Taliban as a force for stability. Now we back the warlords as a force for stability. They too need stability (see Reason 2). Stability is something you can never have too much of.
5. We are fighting in Afghanistan because we hope that we'll be lucky enough to survive un-maimed and then perhaps the army will pay for our *college education* and then perhaps we'll find one of the few well-paid jobs that still exist by then.
6. We are fighting in Afghanistan because we want to be fair to our generals and give them a chance to *get it right this time* and overcome the trauma of their failure in Vietnam (the poor guys).
7. We are fighting in Afghanistan because we want to stimulate the American economy by expanding the market for U.S. *arms manufacturers*.

8. We are fighting in Afghanistan because we want to capture *Osama bin Laden*, who is no longer in the country.

9. We are fighting in Afghanistan because we want to show the world that we are *no worse than the British and Russians*, who fought in Afghanistan before us.

10. We are fighting in Afghanistan because President Obama is a *transformative and restorative national* and we do not want to undermine his position.

Stefan

Reflections on Right Wing Talk Radio

Right-wing talk radio seems in search of a savior, at least those that broadcast the gospel as interpreted by the religious right who seek to impose a biblical order while abandoning the social aspects of traditional Christianity. The religious right holds a quasi-Calvinist view (with the terror of End Times thrown in), according to which God rewards those who outdo their brethren in cut-throat competition to earn the big bucks. So hold on to your job at all costs and climb the corporate ladder, stepping on the fingers of the guy on the rung below. This worship of cut-throat competition is naturally accompanied by cynical paranoia – heated exaggeration, a suspicious attitude, outright dishonesty, and conspiratorial fantasy. Paranoia is hard to confine to one part of the mind and expands into a worldview.

The function of paranoia

Right-wing talk radio is full of distrust and fear – fear of the unknown, fear of Moslems, fear of invasion – and this feeds the paranoia.

Paranoia actually performs an important social function. It's one way of bringing order to a disorderly world. Seeing conspiracy everywhere you look at least makes sense of things beyond your understanding. The threat of climate change, financial collapse, nuclear weapons, terrorism – these are phenomena of such magnitude that any conceivable action feels like David versus Goliath.

The *millions* of Americans who listen to religious conservative talk radio are gradually bringing the United States closer to fascism. Is this because a growing number of them believe there is no alternative?

Twenty-five years ago, Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale actually presented the U.S. electorate with real policy choices, even if they offered no alternative to the established system. Today, however, any differences are a mere matter of degree. The neoliberal stance is shared by both parties. Republicans rail against the Democrats' bailouts,

government takeovers, and budget deficits, hoping the populace forgets that all these things also occurred under George W. Bush. Meanwhile, almost every single concept in Obama's health plan has been pushed by senior Republicans, from Bob Dole to Mitt Romney.

Farewell to Keynes

The Democrats once accepted Keynes' approach to economic policy. Keynes' concern was to ensure social stability by maintaining full employment at relatively high wages. His utopia was a society of leisure and prosperity, beauty, grace, and variety, where "love of money" would be regarded as an aberration. The new neoliberal paradigm sacrifices all social values – and is prepared if necessary to sacrifice democracy itself – on the altar of "sound finance." Today's spineless and stupid Democrats also kowtow to the neoliberal god.

Glen Beck bleats over the airwaves that the call of the "socialist" and "Moslem" Obama for voluntary national service is "something out of Maoist China." But the "progressive" president of "change" and "hope" copied this idea from George W. Bush, and he in turn copied it from his father, George H.W. Bush, who first proposed it in 1989.

With names like "No Spin Zone," "Nothing But Truth," and "Steel on Steel," right-wing talk radio programs appropriate the "news" format and masquerade as news broadcasts. Many liberals get their news from satirical programs like "The Daily Show" or "The Colbert Report." The disinformation is so effective that all these people actually imagine that they are hearing the news!

Both political parties represent the same class interests and strive for the same class goals. The strident yap-yap-yap that endlessly streams forth from the radio talk shows does not express any significant policy differences, but is contrived as a substitute for them.

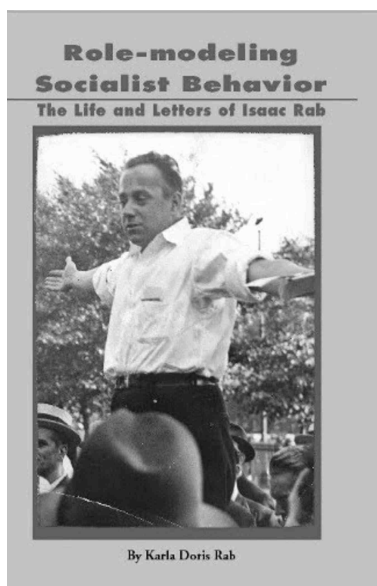
An objective critique must resist all attempts to manipulate its ideas for purposes opposed to its own. "Criticize all that is."

Joe Hopkins

Book Reviews

Karla Doris Rab, *Role Modeling Socialist Behavior: The Life and Letters of Isaac Rab*. 504 pages. Lulu Press. \$23.16.

This book is currently available from lulu.com: search there for “Isaac Rab” or follow the link at wspus.org. The book is also available through amazon.com.



For most of the twentieth century, Isaac Rab (1893 – 1986) was well known in the Boston area as a socialist soap-box orator, lecturer, and teacher. He was a founding member of the World Socialist Party of the United States and a central figure in the Boston Local for many years.

In this book, our comrade Karla Rab, who is the granddaughter of Isaac Rab, tells the story of his life and presents a large selection of his surviving correspondence as well as many photographs. She draws on her own reminiscences and on those of many others who knew her grandfather.

Isaac Rab was born into an immigrant socialist family on December 22, 1893. He devoted his whole life to the cause until his death on New Year’s Eve 1986. In 1916 he helped form the WSP from the left wing of the Michigan Socialist Party in Detroit. Later he settled in Boston, where he organized the Boston Local of the WSPUS in 1932. He also taught classes on Marxian economics for other organizations, including the Communist Party, the Proletarian Party, and various Trotskyist groupings.

Karla Rab’s book is, of course, about much more than her grandfather as an individual. It is the first history of the World Socialist Movement in the United States. Its importance is great but subtle. It is often said that history is written by the winners. Even the obscure history of North American left politics has its hierarchy. Credibility is given only to “winners” such as the International Workers of the World, the Communist Party, and the Congress of Industrial

Organizations – even though many of the problems that plague the workers' movement are the logical outcomes of their policies.

Social democrats and Leninists like to portray smaller groups like the WSPUS as “isolated sects.” And as the history of the working class movement has been written mainly by them, who is to challenge what they say? However, with the collapse of the left in the United States there has been a reassessment of what various political organizations actually accomplished. For example, in their study of the Auto Workers Union¹ the 1930s era Trotskyists Genora and Sol Dollinger conclude that the Communist “leaders” of the Flint sit-down strikes only succeeded thanks to assistance from the Proletarian Party, which has usually been derided as an isolated sect.

The book under review proves that the WSPUS, while small, was hardly isolated. Rab’s letters demonstrate involvement in the United Auto Workers and the Typographers' Union (a model of democratic unionism) as well as discussions and debates among a wide range of left groups. Among the members of the WSPUS there were highly experienced class warriors. William Pritchard and Jack McDonald had helped lead the Western Labour Rebellion in Canada. Sam Orner had been an IWW organizer in the hard metal mines of the American Rockies as well as the leader of a famous strike of New York City taxi cab drivers in 1934. (He was the model for the character Lefty in Clifford Odett’s famous play, *Waiting for Lefty*.) The Detroit Local of the WSPUS had members who had helped form the United Auto Workers and played roles in the educational services of the most militant UAW locals (Irving Cantor, Joe Brown, David Davenport, Frank Marquart).²

Another important thing about Karla Rab’s book is that it shows how Rab organized his political activity. His letters are a lesson of lasting value in how to approach the personal as well as the intellectual and educational aspects of building a movement for socialism. I have forty years of experience in organizing community groups and labor unions as well as political groups. I have found this book a first-class resource and have dipped into it repeatedly since first reading it in draft form.

FN Brill

Notes

[1] Soll Dollinger and Genora Johnson Dollinger, *Not Automatic: Women and the Left in the Forging of the Auto Workers Union* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

[2] See: Frank Marquart, *An Auto Worker’s Journal: The UAW from Crusade to One-Party Union* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976).

Book Reviews

The Impossibleists -- The Socialist Party of Canada and the One Big Union, Selected Articles 1906-1938. Revised edition with added material. Includes Ginger Goodwin's writings. Perfect bound book, 90 pages, US\$14.00 *This book is available from Red Lion Press, Box 297 Station A Nanaimo, British Columbia, V9R 5K9, Canada. Make your check or money order out to Red Lion Press.*

Peter E. Newell, *The Impossibleists: A Brief Profile of the Socialist Party of Canada.* 404 pages, US\$18.95. *This book is available in the US from the online bookstore of the WSPUS at wspus.org.*



These two recently published books deal with our companion party in the World Socialist Movement, the Socialist Party of Canada. The SPC is the only one of the companion parties to have become a mass movement.

The articles brought together in the first of these books include reports of organizing work as well as theoretical and polemical pieces. Of particular interest are the critiques of the USSR and its Leninist followers in the “Comical” Party of Canada.

Included in this edition are the writings of Ginger Goodwin. Widely known in Canada up to his death in 1918, Goodwin was an organizer both for the SPC and for the United Mine Workers Union. For a number of years he was also vice president of the Federation of

Labor of British Columbia.

Up until 1918 Goodwin was classified as unfit for military service due to lung conditions related to coal mining, but he was called up for active service after he organized several strikes in the Nanaimo coal mining region. Convinced that he had been set up, he avoided conscription by escaping to the woods outside of Cumberland, BC. On July 27, 1918, Goodwin was shot without warning by a Mountie* as he was walking to his cabin. Goodwin was and continues to be a legend among the workers of British Columbia. Since the 1980s a yearly gathering of workers has been held in Cumberland, B.C. to honor his memory.

The One Big Union (OBU) was founded in 1919 as an industrial union similar to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) but based on socialist principles.

Like the SPC and Karl Marx, the OBU saw class struggle as a constant in capitalist society, but unlike the IWW it did not regard itself as prefiguring the new society.

The OBU started off with 40,000 members in Canada and another 30,000 in the US. Its creation shook the American Federation of Labor to its core. The OBU gained its members through the withdrawal of union locals from existing Canadian and American unions. In 1919 the US Western District of the International Longshoremen's Association voted to leave the ILA and join the OBU. Similarly, there were serious moves for the Washington State and Montana State AFLs to switch to the OBU.

In 1923 the OBU led a strike of 120,000 textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Other areas where it was strong were the San Francisco Bay Area and the important mining region centered in Butte, Montana.

By 1925 the OBU was washed up in the United States, but in Canada it remained a national union until 1956, when it took its 16,000 members into the merger of the Canadian AFL and CIO federations.

The second book under review is a history of the Socialist Party of Canada by Peter E. Newell. The author is a member of the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB) – another companion party of the World Socialist Movement.

The book provides a chronological account of the SPC, both during its heyday between 1912 and 1925 and following its rebirth in the early 1930s. The research is impeccable and dispels some of the myths that have been spread about the SPC by Leninists of various stripes. This work will be of great value to labor historians as well as to socialists.

However, we still need a third book on the SPC that would provide an organizational history – an account of how the party was established and organized, how it grew, how it approached issues, and how it interacted with the OBU and other workers' organizations. For example, although I have been researching the history of the SPC for over a dozen years, I only recently discovered that the SPC organized an unemployment movement in Toronto.

* a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

FN Brill

Boston Local In The 1930s

Excerpt from Role Modeling Socialism: Life and Letters of Issac Rab



Around seventy new members joined Boston Local of the Workers' Socialist Party between 1933 and 1939.

Towards the beginning of this period, the comrades were renting a hall in the Morton Theatre Building on an as-needed basis for propaganda meetings, while the discussion at business meetings centered around plans for distributing *The Socialist Standard*; how best to publicize Rab's Study Class (which had been meeting more or less continuously ever since late 1929); lectures; and, during the summer, outdoor meetings, at which the local membership were

joined from time to time by visiting comrades from New York. The official contact address, which was listed in the *Socialist Standards* of the period, was Fred Jacobs's home in Roxbury.

In late November 1933, with a membership of 12, the Local voted to rent a two-room suite in Codman Square, Dorchester -- one room having a seating capacity of 75, and the other suitable for an office. The Local was very eager to publicize this new Headquarters; they asked the comrades in England to help by advertising, and the SPGB complied. The ad below appeared in the *Socialist Standards* for April and May, 1934.

Much later, in 1978, Rab was asked how he had gotten Boston Local started. In reply, first he mentioned the Vagabond Club and the Science Club; and he told about organizing street meetings. Then he said, "but more important, I organized a class in Dorchester. That was the most wonderful class. It lasted for two years. It was always on a Tuesday night, and the average attendance, believe it or not, was 125 people...It's amazing. It's unbelievable. And who were they? The class was organized in a very unusual fashion. The first section

was a discussion on current events. And all the politicians of Boston and Dorchester (it was a Jewish neighborhood up there on Blue Hill Avenue) used to come to that class to get information about current events. They'd stay for the other stuff, too. The second section was some Marxian pamphlet. The Communist Manifesto; Value, Price and Profit; all that kind of stuff, see? The third section was, there was an ex-member of the SLP. He was an elocution teacher. And he says, 'I'd like to give a class on speaking.' So that was the last section of the class. And that's how come it was so well attended every week for over two years. Gee, that was something out of the ordinary! "

Within a few years, as the membership grew, it became feasible to move WSP Headquarters to 12 Hayward Place, a tiny byway just off 600 Washington Street in the heart of Boston. It was an easy walk from there to the Boston Common, where there was a long-standing tradition of outdoor speaking...

Because it was recognized that anyone representing the WSP in public needed to have a solid grasp not only of the subject matter they were speaking about, but also of any issue that might be brought up by a heckler in the audience, no comrade spoke in public for the organization without having passed the Speakers Test.

Rab and Jack Whittaker both had taken the test in January 1933. The National Executive Committee, which was located in New York until 1939, administered the test in person to comrades applying for it in the New York area. In Boston, Rab handled it himself, until the Local had enough speakers to form a committee for the purpose.

Rab always had a special talent for reaching out to people and communicating with them. This was not only true for people close at hand, like the Harvard and MIT professors he often got to speak at the Vagabond Club meetings, but also for people far away whose writing he admired. Early in the Thirties, Rab became impressed with the work of Anton Pannekoek, the Dutch astronomer and Marxist theoretician. He corresponded with this scientist, establishing a relationship of mutual respect. When, in 1936, Pannekoek was invited to attend a meeting of astronomers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he let Rab know he was coming to Boston and the two of them arranged for him to address a class at WSP Headquarters.

Ralph Roberts, one of newer comrades, was assigned to meet Pannekoek and bringing him to Headquarters. "Rab told me to go to the subway," Roberts reported, "and wait out on the outside, and a man by the name of Pannekoek, a philosopher, will come and speak to us. And he'll be wearing a flower in his lapel. Sure enough! A little old man with white hair came out, wearing a flower. I said, 'Are you Mr. Pannekoek?' He said, 'Yes.' I introduced myself and told him I was here to greet him and take him down to the Headquarters... And that night we had a good turn-out at the meeting, and he spoke. His approach was similar to ours -- that's why Rab knew about him... How he knew about him, I don't know. It was interesting. He'd been invited to speak at MIT."

Boston Local In The 1930s

Rab smiled mischievously when he told me how the MIT group, who had paid for Pannekoek's travel to Boston, were upset when the Dutchman spent more time with the WSP than he did at MIT. Later, in 1947, Pannekoek contributed an article to the WSP's journal, *The Western Socialist*, on "Public Ownership versus Common Ownership." Later still, in 1959, when I was planning a trip to Europe, Rab urged me to look him up and say "Hello." I was too shy to do so at that time, and Pannekoek died the following year....

All during the Depression era, more and more people were attracted to the Workers' Socialist Party; and the more members there were, the more activities the organization was able to support. There were Locals in New York, Boston and Los Angeles in the mid-to-late nineteen thirties. ...

Socialist fervor was in the air. When the Boston comrades hired a band to play at their socials, half the musicians wound up joining the organization as active members. Local Boston was truly in its heyday. A critical mass had been achieved.

What might be seen as a kind of climax to this period in Party history was the "mass meeting for Socialism" that the members of Boston Local held that year. The suggestion first came up at an August meeting of the Local, at which it was agreed "that a mass meeting be held at the Old South Meeting House, providing \$25.00 for that purpose is raised beforehand."

A committee of six, including Billy Rab, Len Feinzig, "Kriggy," Ralph Roberts, and two others, was put in charge of making the arrangements. They held a "Depression party" social on November 12, to raise money, and considered which comrades would be the best speakers for the occasion. Billy made an advertising circular to distribute.

It was the custom at this time for the officers of Boston Local to present a "Semi-Annual Report " to the membership every June and December. Here is Secretary Charlie Rothstein's account of the mass meeting in his semi-annual report for the winter of 1938:

...The most important event of the period was the mass meeting for Socialism, held at the Old South Meeting House on November 27. Despite the fact that the weather was unfavorable, between 230 and 270 workers were present... The fund for the mass meeting was first set for \$25, but with the aid of our members and sympathizers throughout the country, the final figure reached far beyond expectations. Thousands of circulars were distributed throughout the city and suburbs. A brief announcement was made over the radio, and a sound truck was hired for a day to advertise the meeting. There were also two conspicuous ads placed in the newspapers. The speakers were: Comrades A. Rab, I. Rab and Gloss of Local Boston, and Comrade Felperin of Local New York. The chairman was Comrade Muse. The position of the Workers' Socialist Party was ably presented...

This group had an Educational Committee comprised of Anne Rab, Lenny Feinzig and George Alpine; as well as a Social Committee that consisted of

Natie Hoffman, Betty Freedman, Bella Alpine and Bobby Weisberg. Ralph Roberts was in the youth group too, although he was probably its oldest member. As an organizer for the ILGWU, Roberts was able to introduce many of his Union contacts to socialist ideas. He also was at least partly responsible for the extraordinary success the WSP had at drawing crowds to the party socials at Headquarters.

Mickey Rosenfield was the group's secretary. Reading her Minutes, I have the impression that "The Young Workers' Socialist Educational Group" felt, in many ways, like a continuation of the old Science Club, with a lot of the same individuals in attendance, and the same kind of informal oversight from Rab; only now, the "young people" were older and more politically focused...

Meanwhile, the Local in general continued to participate in very successful outdoor Sunday meetings on the Charles Steet Mall, which continued into December with an average attendance of 264 people.

A crowd estimated at 1,350 listened to a debate between the WSP and a group called the American Action Associates on Sept. 11. The topic was: 'Can Capitalism be Reformed in the Interest of the Working Class,' with Comrades Gloss and I. Rab representing Local Boston.

As Comrade Rothstein asserted in his report at the end of the year:

In conclusion, due primarily to the mass meeting and to the large attendances at the Sunday outdoor meetings, the last 6 months of the year 1938 can be considered as the most successful in the history of Local Boston. The influence of the Local was extended, and many workers, for the first time became acquainted with the name and principles of the Workers' Socialist Party....

The Western Socialist

1939 was the year when The Western Socialist, the journal of the Socialist Party of Canada, moved to Boston and became a joint organ of the SPC and the Workers' Socialist Party. The first issue of The Western Socialist had been published in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in October 1933; but by 1939 it was difficult for the Canadian comrades to maintain publication because of the political climate. The Canadian Parliament declared war on Germany September 7, 1939.

Although New York had always been the seat of the National Office, and the New York comrades were still managing to hold regular meetings and to publish The Socialist, it was clear that Local Boston was in a better position than New York to take over regular publication of The Western Socialist. Through his Anarchist connections, Rab knew someone who had been on the Sacco and Vanzetti Committee a little over a decade earlier. Mr. Felicani owned the Excelsior Press, in Boston. There were enough active Local Boston comrades to assure getting out a publication on a consistent basis (which they did from 1939 until 1980), whereas the publication of The Socialist by Local New York had proven to be spotty at best.

Boston Local In The 1930s

At around this same time, the National Office was also transferred to Boston.

The first issue of The Western Socialist to be published by Excelsior Press, in Boston, was Vol. VI - No. 55, but it is clear that this issue was prepared largely in Canada, and it carries a "Manifesto of the Socialist Party of Canada on the War." The next issue is dated November 1939, when the USA was gearing up for World War II. On the front cover is emblazoned this statement about the war:

"For us the cry must not be national defense but International Working-Class Solidarity."

-- A sentiment as timely and meaningful today as it was then. It is discouraging to note that from 1939 to the present writing (2006) there has never been a time when war was not being waged someplace on Earth, and to remember that in all these wars, the victims have been overwhelmingly members of the working class...

The War Years

In September 1940, the United States passed a military conscription bill. All during the war, the WSP maintained a policy that no member of the Armed Services, or of the Police Force, could remain in the organization. Some of the comrades were conscientious objectors, but most who were drafted left the party until they were released from duty. Bill Rab was not drafted until late in the War; he served with the Air Force, in Europe, from 1943 to 1945...

One of [Rab's] favorite aphorisms was: "All things are interrelated, and Socialism is the Queen that unites all the sciences." He demonstrated this continually by starting up conversations with people about whatever they were interested in, and quickly turning the encounter into a discussion of the case for socialism -- without ever changing the subject. Rab also was fond of making the point: "Everyone you talk with will easily concede that in their own particular line of work, things would go better if we had socialism. But very few people can see that the same can be said of all aspects of society."...

On July 2, 1946, at a Local business meeting, Rab was elected National Organizer. He conceived his tasks in this position to be twofold: "(1) to help the headquarters staff to dig itself out of its detail difficulties caused by being swamped with work, being short handed, and the lack of a proper routine system and (2) to aid in building up the Party."...

Rab, in his new role as National Organizer, went back to Detroit in an attempt to build up a Local there, where the WSP had originally been founded almost 20 years ago. He visited Olga, the old friend whose baby Ella Rab had nursed along with her own son in 1917. That baby had grown up to be a doctor, and Olga had remarried. Rab now met her second husband and the couple's children for the first time: a little boy named Bill, and a daughter,

Harriett, who was fifteen. Olga had never paid much attention to Rab's and her

first husband's brand of socialism, and had never spoken about it with her children. Her Russian parents had been in the Socialist Party of America, and they had never spoken about it with her children. Her Russian parents had been in the Socialist Party of America, and they had returned to Russia in support of the 1917 Revolution.

Now Olga was dismayed to hear Rab insist, after all this time, there was no real socialism in the Soviet Union, and she said as much to her daughter.

"Never mind," said young Harriett, "I'll set him straight!" She tried to tell him how wrong he was; but Harriett now experienced much the same feeling that Rab himself had had, the first time he heard Moses Baritz expound the case for scientific socialism right here in Detroit.

"In Socialism," Rab explained to Harriett, "there will be no classes. You can't deny there is a class-divided society in Russia. There won't be any money in Socialism; everyone will have free access to what they need. Do you think that's the way it is in the Soviet Union?" Harriett, listening to Rab, became a scientific socialist on the spot. "He had such vitality," she remembered when we talked about this in 2004. "He was an inspiration! He could quote Capital like Scripture."

Harriett became one of the comrades in the new Detroit Local that resulted from Rab's organizing visit, along with Gordon Coffin and his daughter Mardon; Irving Canter; Frank Marquart, and others. And although she was away from the socialist movement during the Sixties and Seventies, she was to return as one of the strongest members of the organization in the years after Rab was gone...

The Scott Nearing Debate

Meanwhile, at the same time as all this was going on, Local Boston comrades on both sides of the controversy were busily making preparations for what was to become their largest and most effectively publicized activity to date: a debate at Boston's Old South Meeting House between Comrade Frank Marquart and Scott Nearing.

Nearing was quite a well-known figure in 1947, already the author of several books, who considered himself a pacifist and a socialist, but who also supported the Soviet Union. He had agreed to debate with the WSP the topic: "Resolved: That the Soviet Union is Pioneering an Alternative to Capitalism." It was rare for a figure of his reputation to debate with the representative of a party which had no famous "names," and Local Boston did everything they could to take advantage of this opportunity to attract a large indoor crowd to hear the case for socialism.

After considering several alternatives, the decision was taken to have Marquart of Local Detroit represent the Party. Marquart had plenty of speaking experience as the Education Director for the United Auto Workers union, and could well articulate the socialist position in the debate. Len Feinzig, Local

Boston Local In The 1930s

Boston's best debater, was chosen to be chairman. The comrades placed advertisements in the two largest Boston papers, the Globe and the Herald, to appear on the morning of the debate; they printed and distributed circulars; they rented a sound truck to tell everyone about the anticipated mass meeting; and they erected a prominent sign outside the Old South Meeting House. These efforts paid off; on at 8:00 PM, May 2, 1947, a large audience came to hear two avowed Socialists debate about "Communism."

During the debate, Nearing stated: "Russia, despite its present shortcomings and difficulties, represents the vanguard -- the beginning of a new system that is to replace capitalism."

Marquart summed up as follows: "To replace American capitalism, I would not advocate the bureaucratic totalitarian Russian state capitalism which Nearing favors, but socialism. Socialism means a system of society where there would be no classes; the means of production would be at the disposal of society as a whole; commodity production and the price system would be wiped out; cultural advantages would be open to all the people; the state would be replaced by a democratic administration of things, and the guiding motto would be "From each according to his abilities and to each according to his needs."

According to everyone I ever heard speak of this debate -- and it was still being spoken of well into the next decade, when I began to listen to the comrades at Headquarters -- thought that Marquart had won the debate hands-down. There was a huge May Day social immediately afterwards to celebrate...

World Socialist Party of the United States

One Agenda item that gave rise to a very lively discussion was choosing a new name for the organization, which had come up because of a troublesome confusion between the "Workers Socialist Party" and a new Trotskyist organization which had dubbed itself the "Socialist Workers Party." Many members were reluctant to give up the old name, which had, after all, been in use for many years before this new group appeared. In the end, it was decided to send a referendum to the entire membership, asking "Do you want the name of the party changed?" and also, "Whichever way you voted on the question just above, if the name is changed which of the following names do you prefer?" Six choices were listed.

When the votes were tallied, the WSP officially became the World Socialist Party.

Rab often exclaimed in later years what a fortuitous choice that was. It emphasizes the international nature of the socialist movement. In fact, the group of companion parties subscribing to the same object and principles as the Socialist Party of Great Britain, which before 1947 had never really had a common name, is now known as the World Socialist Movement.

Russia Never Was Socialist

From: Impossibilists: Selected Articles

The *Socialist Standard* for August contains a review of three books: “An Illustrated History of the Russian Revolution” published by Martin Lawrence, “Preparing For Revolt” by Lenin and “Lessons of October” by Trotsky.

It is clearly shown by means of quotations from these works that the leaders of the Russian Revolution were simply acting under the force of circumstances and that the establishment of socialism was not the main thought that guided them.

One of the most particular features of the so-called Communist propaganda is that it has fooled the public into believing that the Communist leaders are Marxists whereas they are simply Russian nationalists who quote Marx the way the devil quotes scripture: that is to say, they use it as a means to a capitalist end.

Here, from the writings of Lenin, Trotsky and the others you have proof supplied that the whole policy of the Moscowites is, and has been from the first, both reactionary and dangerous from the standpoint of the aspirations of the workers of the Western world. The position is that the Third International is the foreign office of Soviet Russia, and her tools and agents which comprise her diplomatic arm, are by means of this organization, endeavoring to further the national interests of Russia. The real working class movement in the Western



winnipeg
general strike 1919
birth of the obu

Russia Never Was Socialist

countries is fiercely attacked whenever it refuses to accept the leadership of Moscow. The wage slaves of all countries outside Russia are looked upon as material to be molded and used.

We have for years endeavored to get the workers of Canada to realize the danger. We are pleased to note that an ever-increasing number are now beginning to do so and to place these so-called communists where they belong. They are tools of a rising capitalist nation whose slaves work for wages and are like the slaves in other capitalist countries, deluded into believing that they are free. Because the capitalist class has not yet appeared in person in Russia is not



to say that capitalism is not there. The capitalist class are also there in embryo and a ruling class in the shape of the so-called Communists of Russia are endeavoring to foster their growth and development.

It is owing to “the low stage of development of Russia’s productive forces and the incompleteness of her economic and technical organization” that the colossal strain of the World War precipitated Tsarism into the abyss. The state machine had to be reorganized, not in order to abolish the imperfectly developed capitalism, but in order to clear the way for its development. As in the French Revolution, so in Russia, the interests of individuals who had amassed great wealth in any form under the old regime had to be sacrificed to the property owning class generally. This is all the so-called Socialism of Russia amounts to.

With an army in revolt and economic collapse in sight, power passed into the hands of the only party with sufficient organization and understanding to face the task of peace and reconstruction. That this party contained a considerable working class element and possessed also a marked degree of Socialist knowledge, is an encouraging symptom of working class ability and the spread of revolutionary ideas.

The foreign policy of the Bolsheviks has likewise proved but a variant of the old Tsarist policy of intrigue. Instead of assisting the education of the international working class it has financed confusion and the propaganda of criminally futile policies of insurrection, long ago obsolete in Western Europe.

OBU Bulletin, August 23 1929

Declaration of Principles

of the Companion Parties of World Socialism

Object:

The establishment of a system of society based on the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth by and in the interest of society as a whole.

Declaration of Principles:

The Companion Parties of Socialism hold that:

1. Society as at present constituted is based upon the ownership of the means of living (i.e., land, factories, railways, etc.) by the capitalist or master class, and consequent enslavement of the working class, by whose labor alone wealth is produced.
2. In society, therefore, there is an antagonism of interests, manifesting itself as a class struggle between those who possess but do not produce, and those who produce but do not possess.
3. This antagonism can be abolished only by the emancipation of the working class from the domination of the master class, by the conversion into the common property of society of the means of production and distribution, and their democratic control by the whole people.
4. As in the order of social evolution the working class is the last class to achieve its freedom, the emancipation of the working class will involve the emancipation of all mankind, without distinction of race or sex.
5. This emancipation must be the work of the working class itself.
6. As the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation, exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of the wealth taken from the workers, the working class must organize

Declaration of Principles

consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, in order that this machinery, including these forces, may be converted from an instrument of oppression into the agent of emancipation and overthrow of plutocratic privilege.

7. As political parties are but the expression of class interests, and as the interest of the working class is diametrically opposed to the interest of all sections of the master class, the party seeking working class emancipation must be hostile to every other party.

8. The companion parties of socialism, therefore, enter the field of political action determined to stand against all other political parties, whether alleged labor or avowedly capitalist, and call upon all members of the working class of these countries to support these principles to the end that a termination may be brought to the system which deprives them of the fruits of their labor, and that poverty may give place to comfort, privilege to equality, and slavery to freedom.

Adopted by the WSPUS in Detroit, MI July, 1916

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Contents WSR #22 January 2011

Introduction.....	1
The Meaning of the U.S. Midterm Election Results.....	3
Can the Tea Party Save the American Dream?	6
Disillusioned – But Not Half Disillusioned Enough!.....	11
Obama: The Brand and the President.....	17
The World Outlook of the Young Obama.....	33
How Much is Obama Worth?.....	43
On Health Insurance Reform.....	46
Life’s Unwitting Executioner.....	54
Asteroid Wars.....	64
Selecting a U.S. President: The Invisible Primaries.....	68
The Electoral College.....	71
The Politics of the “Lesser Evil”.....	75
Unemployment – Is It Really the Problem?.....	81
Waste and Want.....	83
Is There a Cure for Economic Crises?.....	87
The Gift of Blood.....	90
Two Petrarchan Sonnets	92
10 Good Reasons Why We Are Fighting in Afghanistan.....	93
Reflections on Right Wing Talk Radio.....	95
Book Reviews.....	97
Boston Local In The 1930s.....	101
Russia Never Was Socialist.....	108
Declaration of Principles.....	110
Contact the WSP.....	111