

Obama & Clinton

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The race for the Democratic presidential nomination has gotten more interesting in the past two months with the emergence of Barack Obama as the clear contender to Hillary Clinton. Obama's articulated program is extremely vague and hardly to the left of Clinton's, but his campaign rhetoric is much more radical — "Change" seems to be his main slogan. Probably more important, the possibility of electing the first Black man president of the country seems to have inspired more enthusiasm than the chance of electing the first woman.

Election years have always presented a problem for many people who consider themselves liberals or radicals, aside from hardcore anarchists like myself, who do not believe in participating in the bourgeois political system. Even for those who find themselves far to the left of the viable candidates (those with a chance to win), there is always the tendency to want to vote for the more liberal candidate (usually a Democrat), no matter how politically distasteful that person may be, if only to try to prevent the more conservative candidate (usually a Republican) from winning. Hence the tactic of voting for the "lesser evil." This is not a ridiculous argument, especially in the absence of a mass radical movement or a viable radical electoral alternative. Although the differences between the Democratic and Republican parties, taken as a whole, are slight, they do exist, and they are particularly noteworthy in the realm of certain social issues of concern, among them, the environment, women's rights (e.g. the right to abortion), and the rights of homosexuals (e.g., gay marriage). The "lesser evil" argument is certain to be more appealing this year than usual, and for several reasons:

1. After eight disastrous years of George W. Bush and his reactionary administration, a change is clearly needed;
2. It would be very good for the radical movement and the country as a whole if the conservative movement, on the move for several decades and politically ascendant for the past eight years, were delivered a decisive setback; and
3. Electing a woman president or a Black president would be significant, both for the country and the world.

For the first two reasons, I think it would definitely be better that a Democrat win this year's presidential election instead of a Republican; and it would be particularly good if either a woman

or a Black man were to be elected. This is not because of what I think they might actually accomplish.

In the first place, I am very skeptical about what Hillary or Barack, left to their own devices, would do to bring about real social change in this country. Nothing either of them has said or done leads me to believe that they would take the radical steps that are needed to address the nation's deep problems. Despite Barack's, and (occasionally) Hillary's, rhetoric, they are both mainstream politicians. They both have made their way to the top of the system (true, through considerably different paths). They both have made their share of morally questionable moves, and both have been involved with their share of shady characters. It's the nature of the business. Even more important, they both are committed to the economic and political system of this country — capitalism and bourgeois democracy — and have no intention of threatening it or its ruling class (of which they are both a part), or even of changing the system in any truly significant way. And without such a threat, no serious solution to the problems of the country — rooted as they are in the drastic disparities of wealth and power, and the racist and sexist structures that characterize the nation — is possible.

In the second place, even if Barack and Clinton were committed to serious social change, the political system is so arranged as to make such change extremely difficult if not impossible to carry out. Although many liberals and even some radicals think highly of the United States Constitution, it is actually an extremely conservative and undemocratic document. It is often forgotten that the “founding fathers” were, on the whole, very conservative individuals. Most were owners of large plantations based on slave labor or were rich merchants or businessmen who thrived off the exploitation of lower class people. True, they were revolutionaries, but they were reluctant revolutionaries, virtually forced into the revolution by the obtuseness of a stupid English (actually, a German) monarch, an inept government, and an arrogant ruling class, and they did their best to make sure the results of the revolution were as limited and as moderate as possible. Although the constitution is often described a document designed to prevent tyranny, to most of the nation's original leaders, the danger was as much the “tyranny of the masses” as it was the tyranny of a monarch or of a colonial power. As a result, they consciously designed the constitution to limit the power of the lower classes. Such safeguards included the exclusion of Blacks and women from voting and setting property qualifications so high that they excluded almost all lower class white men. Other measures directed against the power of the lower classes were: the establishment of a bicameral legislature (Congress), with the superior house (the Senate) based on the very undemocratic principal of the election of two senators per state, regardless of the states' relative populations; the actual election of the chief executive to occur in an electoral college whose members were not bound to support the choice of those who elected them; and the establishment of an appointed (that is, un-elected) supreme tribunal, the Supreme Court. Although, under the pressure of social movements and historical events, the constitution has been opened up, it is still a very conservative document that seriously thwarts the struggle for social change.

Even if the constitution were more democratic, the broader political system ensures that the political process is dominated and ultimately controlled by the very narrow economic and political elite that runs the country. One can't even participate in politics without having the backing of rich and powerful people. And one can't survive in politics, let alone get to the top, without playing the political game, which includes rewarding your backers and fighting to further their interests. Even initially honest individuals who participate in the process and play the game are

eventually corrupted. It's Darwinian: to have survived and prospered in the political system means that one is corrupt: either a liar or a thief or both, and surrounded and backed by people who are liars or thieves or both.

But even if we assume that an honest individual could rise to the top of our intrinsically corrupt political system, and even if we assume that such an individual could get serious radical legislation passed by Congress, as long as that individual is committed to the current system, he or she will not take any steps that would seriously weaken or jeopardize that system or its ruling class. In other words, that individual would continue to govern according to the needs of the system: enriching the ruling class, protecting the capitalist system, and defending its "international interests," in other words, its imperialist empire.

To me, then, the election of Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama or virtually any Democrat would have a positive impact on the country not because of what she or he might achieve, but because of the effect it would have on the political climate of the country in general, and on the liberal/radical movement in particular. At the very least, it would improve the morale of liberals and radicals. It would also most likely lead to an increase in the activity of the radical movement in the country. The last eight years have been very frustrating times for leftwing political activists, and the election of a Democrat, and even more, the election of a woman or a Black Democrat, would raise their hopes about the possibility of bringing about social change, induce them to step up their work, and encourage others to join them. Not least from my point of view, putting such a person in power would most likely lead to their exposure in the eyes of their followers, in the sense that he/she would not live up to his/her campaign promises. If this were to happen, many people might begin to recognize the Democratic Party and the political system as a whole for the reactionary institutions they are.

Of the two, the election of Obama is likely to have the greater impact. For one thing, the world has already seen woman in positions of national leadership: Golda Meir in Israel, Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain, Indira Gandhi in India, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Corazon Aquino in the Philippines, Una Merkel in Germany, etc. And this has given people the opportunity to see that they weren't much different from men, and in some cases, such as Margaret Thatcher, they were worse. (Of course, we have seen Black leaders in Africa, but they have not, unlike Thatcher, Merkel, and Meir, been leaders of industrially advanced nations, and their failures can much more easily be ascribed to other factors, e.g., the legacy of imperialism, the lack of economic resources, etc.) For another, given the particular history of the United States, especially the vile nature of the oppression Black people have been subjected to (including slavery, segregation, and lynching) in this the "most democratic country in the world," the election of an African American would have a greater symbolic meaning than the election of a woman. It would also, and to me this is most significant, give the greatest boost to the morale of leftists and the biggest spur to the revival of the radical movement. This is not just because Obama is Black. It is also because he has chosen to cast his campaign as a movement for social change, whereas Hillary has gone out of her way to demonstrate her Establishment credentials. As a result, in the past few weeks Obama has aroused considerable excitement, particularly among certain layers of younger people in the country.

For these reasons, although I personally do not participate in the US political system, I have no desire to try to convince those who do vote not to vote for Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama. In short, while I do not advocate such a vote, I won't try to dissuade people from voting.

However, I do intend to make clear, as best I can, that voting in elections, and particularly supporting the Democratic Party, is not the way to bring about radical change in the country. The only way to bring about such a transformation is by building a radical movement that is as politically astute and as politically independent as possible. Above all, this includes being independent of the Democratic Party (and, of course, the Republican Party), and recognizing what type of party the Democratic Party is and the role that it has played, for over one hundred years, in the history of the country.

Although the Democratic Party has portrayed itself, and continues to portray itself, as a party of the people, it is anything but that. First and foremost, it is a capitalist party, dominated and controlled by rich capitalists, including George Soros and Bill Gates, two of the richest men in the world, and their political stooges. Although it is supported by most labor bureaucrats and the leaders of other reform organizations, many of these individuals are rich themselves, and probably more important, they must ultimately dance to the tune of those elements of the US ruling class who support, finance, and control the party. For a variety of reasons, the Democratic Party is usually more rhetorically responsive to the needs and demands of middle and working class people than the Republicans, but it is not a party controlled by middle and working class people, and it has no interest in leading a real fight for their needs. When, historically, it has appeared to lead such a fight, as in the case of the labor movement in the 1930s and the civil rights movement in the 1960s, it has only done so as a response to mass movements that threatened to go beyond its control, movements that threatened the fundamental interests of the ruling class and the system as a whole.

And this is its historic role, which it has played over and over again in the history of the country. In the 1880s and 1890s, the Populist Movement emerged among small farmers (white and Black) and other poor people in the South and the Mid-West who were threatened by the rapid growth of industrial capitalism and the increasing domination of the economy by huge monopolies (the “trusts”), which were squeezing them dry and forcing millions of them off the land (a process that was to continue throughout the first half of the 20th century). In the 1890s, the Populists united and formed an independent party that presented a real challenge to the two established capitalist parties, the Republicans and Democrats. But in the 1896 elections, after the Democrats had adopted several Populist planks in their program and had nominated William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska, a populist-sounding demagogue, as their candidate, the Populists endorsed him (while putting up their own candidate for vice president). Bryan got smothered in the election, and the Populist Party and the Populist movement as a whole soon withered and died.

A similar process occurred during the 1930s. Most people do not know that when Franklin Delano Roosevelt ran for president in the 1932 elections, he ran on a conservative platform — among other things, he claimed to be committed to balancing the federal budget — and he was supported by the Southern wing of the Democratic Party, whose power was based on segregation and lynching, the total exclusion of Black people from the political process. It was not just the intensification of the economic crisis that began with the stock market crash of 1929 that spurred Roosevelt in a liberal direction. It was also the development of mass movements of workers and other lower class people, often led by radicals, that gave the impetus to the New Deal. In 1934, for example, three important cities in the United States — Minneapolis, San Francisco, and Toledo — were paralyzed for weeks at a time by general strikes carried out by the workers of those cities. These strikes were not led by mainstream labor leaders, but by radical socialists: Stalinists in San

Francisco, Trotskyists in Minneapolis, and leftwing socialists in Toledo. In 1936–37, in the face of the intransigence of General Motors, GM autoworkers occupied the factories until they won their demands. Similar organizing drives occurred in the steel, electrical, rubber, food processing, and other industries. It was these mass struggles, and the threat of even more radical movements, that led to the New Deal and the reforms that accompanied it, including the establishment of the National Labor Relations Board and the effective institutionalization of the right to organize and strike. The goal of these reforms was not to make truly radical changes in the country. Roosevelt and his supporters were genuinely interested in carrying out some reforms, but they were also concerned to limit the extent of such reforms, and, even more, to prevent the mass struggles from going beyond the system.

The Democrats played a similar role during the Civil rights movement. While certain elements in the Democratic Party had been sympathetic to the demands of Black people to end segregation, discrimination, and the other legal chains on Black people, the party as a whole, dominated as it was by the Southern segregationists (who also controlled the US Senate), was not. It was only after the civil rights movement had been in motion for eight years (from the Montgomery bus boycott to the March on Washington), that the more liberal elements in the Democratic Party, now ascendant with the victory of John F. Kennedy in 1960, decided to support the movement. Although they were interested in eliminating segregation, discrimination, and the disfranchisement of Blacks (among other reasons, it was very embarrassing for the US to claim to be the leader of the “free world” during the Cold War with the Russians, while subjecting Blacks to legal oppression), they were primarily concerned that the movement might move beyond the limits of what was considered to be legitimate dissent. Remember, while the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was preaching non-violence, Malcolm X, then a leader of the Nation of Islam, was preaching armed self-defense, and was attracting a mass following in the northern cities. And not too long after Malcolm was assassinated, the Black members of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee kicked out its white members and declared SNCC the champion of “Black Power,” while other much more radical Black organizations, among them the Black Panther Party, were being organized. The Civil Rights Movement very quickly turned into the Black Liberation Movement. And as it did so, Black people rioted in city after city across the country — Watts (in Los Angeles), Detroit, Newark, Memphis, among others. Rather than leading the struggle for Black equality and freedom, the Democrats at first resisted Black people’s demands, then tried to limit the struggle to legal, non-violent channels, and then instituted as meager reforms as it was possible at the time. In other words, the Democrats did not lead the struggle for Black rights. They only supported it in attempt to corral it, to use it for their own purposes, and to prevent it from going beyond the system. The riots resulted largely because the needs of Black workers, including the unemployed, in the northern and western cities were not being met, precisely when their hopes for an amelioration of their condition had been raised. Unfortunately, the riots, along with tactical errors committed by the militant black organizations, gave the ruling class the excuse to smash the left wing of the movement, and eventually de-fang the movement as a whole, limiting it to struggles to elect Black candidates and pass “progressive” legislation.

This has been the historic role of the Democratic Party. Rather than being the party of the people, it has for decades been the graveyard of popular movements. It is crucial to understand this if we are to build a movement for real social change in this country, to truly address the needs of Blacks, Latinos, undocumented workers, women, gays, and the millions of other working class and middle class people. If it is to survive, such movement must be truly independent and

controlled democratically by ordinary people. It must recognize who its friends are and who its enemies are. And this means recognizing the true nature and historic role of the Democratic Party and not becoming a mere adjunct to it. The Democratic Party cannot be taken over and reformed, it must be smashed and replaced by organizations that truly involve and represent the millions of lower class people.

So, for those who cannot resist the desire to go out and pull the lever for Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama, at least know what you are doing. Don't be fooled by the Democrats' rhetoric and their promises, no matter how good they may sound. If we let them, they (all of them, including Barack Obama) will stab us in the back.

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