

Progress or regress?

Considering the future of Leftist politics under Obama

opening remarks by Chris Cutrone, for Platypus

Hi, I am Chris Cutrone, and I am speaking for Platypus, which organized this forum.

First, I would like to clarify: I don't think that the topic should be what the Left can or should do under an Obama administration. Rather, we need to admit that there is no Left today. And we need to consider and explore the conditions of possibility for a Left coming into existence some time in the foreseeable future, perhaps under Obama.

Obama's election is a good occasion for the clarification of several issues that block the reconstitution of a Left adequate to the present and future.

For it is Platypus's contention that "the Left is dead!" We say this so that one day there might be a living Left, a force in the world for social emancipation that is lacking today. We regard the present absence of a Left to be a matter of consciousness, a lack of recognition of the actual progressive-emancipatory possibilities in the world as presently constituted. We consider the "Left" today to be a mere relic of past forms of consciousness that are either no longer adequate to the present or were inadequate even in their original historical moments.

So we in Platypus consider the "Left" as it exists today to be actually a pseudo-"Left," an agglomeration of perspectives and notions — a set of more or less coherent but mostly incoherent ideologies — but not an authentic, coherent and powerful consciousness or set of recognitions and ideas, and certainly not a social force.

The confusion with which today's pseudo-"Left" is faced around Obama has multiple registers, and several layers of historical roots, some of which I wish to lay out and discuss, now in my opening remarks, as well as later in the Q&A.

Before that, however, I wish to use myself as an example. From the moment Obama announced his candidacy, I felt strongly he would be the next President. This is because I — unlike those on the "Left" — recognized that a historical shift — a generational passing — had taken place, which had made most of the reasons one might suppose Obama to fail superceded and obsolete. — Obama, by contrast, was a shrewd enough politician to recognize in himself an instrument adequate to the historical moment, one that he has played to great effect.

Generationally, Obama is free in certain key respects from the symbolism of the 1960s that has subsumed politics for more than 40 years. In the process of the election, and as a result of the financial crisis, the hitherto predominant symbolism, for instance, Iraq for Vietnam, has passed in favor of the 1930s Great Depression and FDR. But already earlier in the campaign, Obama had represented an unwinding of the 1960s era and a return to the imagery of either Martin Luther King, Jr., or the Kennedys. History had already begun to unwind from 1968 to the 1963

March on Washington or more precisely to 1960 and JFK's election. We have evidently gotten beyond the endless repetition of 1972 and Nixon vs. McGovern only to arrive back at Camelot! The 1960s New Left and its aftermath have become historically bracketed, and after 40 years, this was none too soon!

Such regression, the degree to which it has freed the social imagination from the trap of the late '60s, has been, if not "progressive," then at least salutary.

For instance, on the issue of "race" in America, Obama has been neither a traditional "black" politician nor has his victory been "post-racial." Rather, Obama has expressed a transformation in the way "race" and racism function, a definite end to the period of post-Jim Crow, post-Civil Rights and post-Black Power forms of social consciousness and politics.

The "Left" has responded to this shift Obama has represented with as much fear as desire. There has been a great deal of anxiety generated about the nature and character of this change. For the most part, there has been anxiety and regret on the "Left" about the end of "black politics" as it has functioned since the 1960s.

Worse still, virtually everyone on the "Left" seemed to harbor either an explicit or secret skepticism or disbelief at Obama's chances. This incredulity was rooted in the "Left's" mistaken understanding and imagination of the ways anti-black racism actually function in America today, and how they have functioned historically leading to the present.

The U.S. is no longer racist in the ways it has been, either in the Jim Crow era nor in the '60s period or its aftermath. Unfortunately, this does not mean a change beneficial for the majority of black people, but it does mean the need for a new social imagination and politics. Obama's election didn't change anything, nor will it, but it did reveal a change that had been long underway. As Bayard Rustin pointed out in the 1960s, black people don't suffer from bad *attitudes* but from bad *social conditions*. Attitudes may have changed but social conditions have not improved — in fact, in many respects they have worsened, and the ways social conditions work against black people for instance have changed: poverty and other forms of disempowerment of the working class function differently today than in the 1950s-60s Civil Rights era, and to the detriment of politics.

But the "Left's" incredulity about this change means only one thing: that the "Left" is more racist than the general population — without this meaning that the greater populace is more "progressive." This is because the "Left" is more ideological and more conservative-reactionary in its outlook, trapped in a set of historical blinders that the greater society has long since overcome.

The fact that such changes have not been unambiguously — or indeed at all — "progressive," in the sense of social emancipation and empowerment, does not mean that the changes have not taken place or that a Left perspective could afford to ignore them.

The fear with which this significance of Obama's victory has been met by the "Left" is rooted in an attempt to avoid or ward off recognition of the obvious: that an earlier form of politics,

specifically “black politics,” of the post-Civil Rights and post-Black Power period, from the 1970s through the 1980s and ’90s, was defunct — if indeed it had ever had any viability at all.

The question is how to respond to the evident depoliticization that Obama represents. — For Obama in no way stood at the head of a “movement” but only of an effective electoral strategy. Obama’s electoral organization cannot be put to other ends, or transformed into a social movement. It cannot be force for change, let alone transformation.

If this inherently *conservative* character of Obama’s victory is faced, what will it mean for conceiving a “Leftist” politics that can and must reckon with the changed conditions of social politics Obama’s success has revealed?

This is the question that the “Left” tries to avoid.

Instead, the Left has become enthralled by the court politics of Obama’s Cabinet appointments and other such clues into which they can try to read his intentions.

Obama himself has acknowledged how he functions as a “projection screen” for others’ desires and hopes (and also perhaps their anxieties and fears). Obama’s soft authoritarianism is significant, for it reveals that the “Left” is hardly free of this inherently conservative and depoliticizing aspect of American “politics.”

For it is Platypus’s contention that we not only live today in the absence of a “Left,” but also in the absence of effective *politics*. Obama is, no less than Bush and Clinton were, the effect of politics in the absence of politics.

Changing this will be a very difficult and manifold task, involving the reinvigoration of organized labor as well as the deep interrogation and transformation of consciousness of present social realities on the “Left.” It will require a radical rebirth of the Left.

But Obama’s victory might at least help sweep away some of the obstacles in social consciousness and imagination that have held back the “Left” for more than a generation. But only if we recognize the opportunity of the present moment for what it is, without either positive or negative illusions.