

BLINDSPOTS AND FEAR OF THE WORKING CLASS

I think a lot of the discussion about Freddie DeBoer's "the blindspot" (with Steve Hynd as one exception) focuses too closely on the personalities—on whether Jane is mean in print or whether Ezra is too conciliatory—and not on whether our political dialogue is dangerously ignoring the plight of workers. For the purposes of this post, I'd like you to first ask yourself why, during the Depression, we started building a safety net for working people, whereas during this current crisis in capitalism, many developed nations are using the crisis as an opportunity to dismantle the safety net.

Then read this part of what DeBoer had to say:

That the blogosphere is a flagrantly anti-leftist space should be clear to anyone who has paid a remote amount of attention. Who, exactly, represents the left extreme in the establishment blogosphere? You'd likely hear names like Jane Hamsher or Glenn Greenwald. But these examples are instructive. Is Hamsher a socialist? A revolutionary anti-capitalist? In any historical or international context— in the context of a country that once had a robust socialist left, and in a world where there are straightforwardly socialist parties in almost every other democracy— is Hamsher particularly left-wing? Not at all. It's only because her rhetoric is rather inflamed that she is seen as particularly far to the left. This is what makes this whole discourse/extremism conversation such a failure; there is a meticulous sorting of far right-wing rhetoric from far right-wing politics, but no similar sorting on the left. Hamsher says bad words and is mean in print, so she is a far leftist. That her politics are

largely mainstream American liberalism that would have been considered moderate for much of the 20th century is immaterial.

[snip]

I look out onto an America that seems to me to desperately require a left-wing. American workers have taken it on the chin for thirty years. They have been faced for years with stagnant wages, rising costs, and the hollowing out of the middle class. They are now confronted with that and a cratered job market, where desperate people compete to show how hard they will work in bad conditions for less compensation. Meanwhile, the neoliberal policy apparatus that brought us here refuses even to consider the possibility that it is culpable, so certain of its inherent righteousness and its place in the inevitable march of progress. And the blogosphere protects and parrots that certainty, weeding out left-wing detractors with ruthless efficiency, while around it orbits the gradual extinction of the American dream.

What seems most important, to me, is that a blind faith in capitalism led to catastrophe. And at a time when we should be reining in the capitalism that failed so badly, we are instead capitulating to it, using the event of the failure of our corporate masters to give them even more. How is that even happening? And to what degree does the blogosphere deserve some of the blame?

Now, aside from the fact that the blogosphere came of age at a time (after Bush v. Gore v. Nader) and with a politician (Dean) when the left reinvested in the two party system, I'm not sure how much of this is distinctly a problem with the blogosphere. Rather, it's a problem with US discourse generally, and the taxonomy

that DeBoer maps out largely comes from compromises many in the blogosphere made to be able to take part in that discourse. (Oh. Btw. Blowjob.) The blogosphere has been certified and thereby neutralized by our political elite, but only certain parts of that blogosphere.

And voila: that means not enough of the leading voices of the blogosphere speak for workers (or the unemployed or the elderly poor or immigrant workers)—or even speak out against our failed capitalist masters. More importantly (and this is why I think DeBoer's point about socialism is important), while some—many of us here at FDL, for example—do offer critiques of our capitalist masters and support for labor such as it exists, almost no one is offering an affirmative ideological alternative to the neoliberalism of the Village.

The absence of a viable threat from the working class makes it easy for DC to use this failure of capitalism to double down on it, to further disenfranchise the poor. Shock Doctrine, baby.

Mobilization Threats

Just as a way of thinking about this, consider last year's three big political rallies in DC. Obviously, rallies are not the only way for real people to inspire fear among the elite, it is a way such threats get narrativized.

Consider, first of all, the rally that probably got the most attention: Glenn Beck's Restoring Honor rally in August, which brought out tens of thousands of TeaPartiers. Now, I think the elite does fear the Tea Partiers. The left (and some Republicans) have reason to fear TeaPartiers physically; the right has to fear them ideologically.

But the rally was notable not for the way it expressed populist anger. Rather, Beck shifted his focus from central TeaParty anti-government issues to instead focus on religion. This was a message about putting your faith in God, not your boots into mobilization. Moreover, the rally would never have been as big as it was

without a bunch of Koch-funded buses to ship people to DC. So rather than an expression of class anger, the Beck rally was more an expression of the cooptation of it by big capitalism (the Kochs) and the neutralization of it with religious themes.

Then there was the other big rally celebrated by the press: the Stewart/Colbert Rally to Restore Sanity/Fear in October. What does it say that one of the biggest popular mobilizations last year, in a year that should have featured pitchforks, instead starred comedians? Sure, the rally got younger people excited about politics, it may have increased electoral turnout among independents. But it was a politics that explicitly espoused the same kind of narrow—and more importantly, polite—discourse that DeBoer is calling out.

And then, finally, there was the forgotten rally, the one which may well have been the biggest in terms of participants: the immigration rally in March, with probably more than 200,000 in attendance. It was a more traditional populist rally, supported by the SEIU and UFCW as well as the immigration groups that sponsored it. And unlike the other two, it called for policies that would benefit working people in America. This was real populist mobilization.

What's truly remarkable about the immigration rally is what didn't happen. First of all, there was little reporting on the rally, effectively disappearing them in the same way the big anti-Iraq war rallies were disappeared. (Note: I'm at fault for this as much as anyone else; I didn't cover it.)

But it's telling, too, how not just the rally but the overall mobilization got neutralized. In spite of the fact that Latino voters are more of an electoral threat than TeaPartiers, in spite of the fact that Latinos were instrumental in Harry Reid's miracle victory last November, we still didn't even pass the DREAM Act, much less comprehensive immigration reform.

Underlying the way popular mobilization worked out last year is racism exacerbated by globalization. Our press doesn't cover important events that happen at least partially in Spanish, and even politicians who once favored CIR flip-flopped when faced with (or given the excuse of) the economic crisis. Which is important, I think, because one of the reasons for the ideological narrowness of our discourse is the way ideological battles have worked out under globalization.

Governance versus Ideology

A corollary to the question, "after such a catastrophic failure in 2008, why aren't we reining in capitalism and expanding the safety net?" is "why isn't anyone declaring victory over capitalism in the same way capitalism once declared victory over communism?"

But who would declare victory? (Some humor: "Hu would declare victory.")

There are several reasons no one is declaring victory. As I suggested, the most obvious country to declare victory would be the Chinese. And the Chinese—being as circumspect as they are—would not declare victory so boisterously as America once did. Moreover, how would a country that regained world standing by playing globalization better than the capitalists declare victory over capitalism? Plus, in this country, there's a willful misunderstanding (at least in the popular press) of how the Chinese have succeeded as they have, with the claim that China beat us with free trade rather than mercantilism. While the US was busy trying to dominate the world through the spread of something it called free trade, China was better at using trade to serve its nation.

So one of the reasons no one is acknowledging that capitalism lost, at least here in the States, is that doing so would amount to a recognition that the US may well lose its hegemonic position. I think in some crowds there's a prohibition on talking about

capitalism's failure because doing so would concede the logic behind US hegemony on the world stage.

Incidentally, I think that's part of what NeoFeudalism is about: an effort on the part of the elite that was always behind the ideology called "capitalism"—which includes the bankers and the contractors of the US, but also includes people like the Saudi royal family—to retain hegemonic control of the world by dramatically changing the social structure of it. There are a lot of people—including a number of "lefty" bloggers—who are committed to US hegemony first, and to the ideology called "capitalism" second, who are happily going to be suckered into supporting policies that will lead to NeoFeudalism.

But back to the Chinese. The other reason the Chinese haven't declared victory, yet, is that it's not entirely clear we haven't brought them down with us. China has its own bubbles right now, food inflation will affect its masses a lot more quickly than it'll affect ours, and there are a whole slew of reasons the country could get shaky pretty quickly. The still unfolding failure of capitalism that started in 2008 hasn't finished unfolding yet, and it's not entirely clear that it won't hurt China almost as much as it will us.

And even if it doesn't, how is a country of 1.3 billion going to do what we have done? This is not to say I begrudge the Chinese the same luxuries I have enjoyed. But one issue that underlies any further contest over ideology is the stark reality that the globe cannot sustain even half the world's population at the living standards produced by consumer capitalism currently enjoyed in the developed world, at least not using fossil fuels to drive it. If China were to weather this crisis successfully, after all, it would need to encourage a significant portion of its population to become American-style consumers. Back when I was in China, the auto companies aspired to sell cars

to China's middle class—300 million people—so basically another America again full of cars. A lot would need to change to make that possible, and I think few people trying to turn the Chinese into consumers as the next stage of the advance of capitalism have thought through the implications of that.

So there seems to be a finite limit to the degree to which China can use capitalism to beat the capitalists.

But I also think something else is going on with ideology as it existed during the Cold War. With the failure of both communism and (thus far, in more limited fashion) capitalism, it becomes increasingly clear that ideology doesn't make for successful countries, governance does. Whether or not capitalism will experience a resurgence, our country has become corrupt and ineffective enough that it's not clear we'd go with it. Moreover, the bogeyman that has replaced the Evil Empire—terrorism—is as much about an increasingly viable challenge to the nation-state, at a time when a rising number of failed states offer a geographic beachhead for such challenges. One of the most important ways to combat "terrorism" is to prevent militarization and climate issues to create more failed states. And that means there will be less emphasis on ideology as it worked in the Cold War and a greater premium on governance.

Which is important because failing capitalism is having real repercussions on things like food supply. Which, as we saw in Tunisia and may well see across the globe, cuts through any debate about ideology quickly. When it comes to the point where governments can't feed their people, then they begin to fear the popular classes again, even if they've managed to insulate themselves from that for decades.

Which brings us full circle, I think. DeBoer suggests we need greater ideological diversity in the blogosphere, and he's right. But what we need just as badly is some way to articulate and mobilize the needs of the working class before

our failure to govern (which the narrowness of our discourse fosters) ends up in food riots.

With the end of the Cold War, the US has had the luxury, for now, of completely ignoring the ideological left because the threats to the country—as the governing class sees them—have everything to do with the market and nothing to do with workers. But ultimately, the combination of failed governance and the market will lead right back to the workers.