

DEMOCRACY AND NOW CAPITALISM ARE FAILING IDEOLOGICALLY; BUT WHAT COMES NEXT?

As I was prepping for my panel on Saturday, I was thinking a lot about PJ Crowley. Crowley is, as you'll recall, the State Department spokesperson who was ousted after he called the treatment of Bradley Manning "ridiculous and counterproductive and stupid." In my panel, I quoted Crowley's comments on American support for unrestricted media. And as I was reviewing all this, I was thinking about Crowley's almost unremarked criticism last week of the Administration's decision to move of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's trial to Gitmo.

The prosecution of #KhalidSheikhMohammed and others under untested military tribunals undercuts our global promotion of the rule of law.

For all my disagreements with Crowley about Manning's incarceration (though note that Crowley is also one of the few in government who has criticized the embarrassing lack of security that made the alleged leak possible), I find his adherence to a now-outmoded approach to diplomacy charming. Almost quaint.

You see, Crowley still appears to believe that America's claim to exceptionalism—the conceit that it serves as a model of democracy and rule of law and liberty to others around the world—not only still exists but still forms a part of our international policy. He believes that this country would choose to follow the law out of consideration that doing so will allow us to exercise power through persuasion rather than force.

Crowley's ouster—the firing of a guy because he dared remind his bosses that American used to choose to do things the right way rather than the way of maximal power—seems symbolic that that approach is now dead.

Indeed, whether or not we've conceded it's dead, others now recognize it, as Glenn Greenwald points out today. (h/t harpie)

Aside from what conduct like [his endorsement of Manning's treatment and his persecution of whistleblowers] reveals about Obama, it also severely undermines the ability of the U.S. to exercise any shred of moral leadership in the world. Consider this series of events:

Washington Post, March 13, 2011:

Obama signs executive order for indefinite detention at Guantanamo

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sociated Press, April 4, 2011:

US deeply concerned over rising China detentions

AP Associated Press

— Mon Apr 4, 3:32 pm ET

WASHINGTON — The United States says it is "deeply concerned" about the rising trend of disappearances and detentions of human rights activists in China.

Reuters, yesterday:

China tells U.S. to quit as human rights judge

The United States is beset by violence, racism and torture and **has no authority to condemn other governments' human rights problems**, China said on Sunday, countering U.S. criticism of Beijing's crackdown. . . . **"The United States ignores its own severe human rights problems**, ardently promoting its so-called 'human rights diplomacy', treating human rights as a

political tool to vilify other countries and to advance its own strategic interests,” said a passage from the Chinese report.

China also “accused the U.S. . . . of pushing for Internet freedom around the world as a way to undermine other nations, while noting that **Washington’s campaign against secret-spilling website WikiLeaks showed its own sensitivity to the free flow of information,**” and further “lambasted the U.S. over issues ranging from homelessness and violent crime to the influence of money on politics and the **negative effects of its foreign policy on civilians.**” China’s human rights record is atrocious, but can anyone contest the validity of its objections to the U.S. and the Obama administration’s purporting to act as human rights arbiters for the world?

Now, all that simply shows that our ideological claim to serve as a model of law and liberty is dead.

But this—this is an ideological collapse America may have a much more difficult time dealing with, because it’s an ideological failure internally.

FAITH in the free market is at a low in the world’s biggest free-market economy. In 2010, 59% of Americans asked by GlobeScan, a polling firm, agreed “strongly” or “somewhat” that the free market was the best system for the world’s future. This has fallen sharply from 80% when the question was first asked in 2002. And **among poorer Americans under \$20,000, faith in capitalism fell from 76% to 44% in just one year.** [my emphasis]

Now, granted, capitalism still commands majority

support in this country; it's just among the people paying the price of capitalism's failure where support has really tanked. (Update: In this Gallup poll from a few weeks ago, 67% of those polled said corporations and banksters have too much power.)

But consider this: by a count of 67% to 59%, **more people in China believe in the power of free markets right now than in the US.** The communists like capitalism better than the capitalists themselves! (Maybe that's because they've taken the jobs of the poorer Americans who lost theirs to globalization).

I wrote a fair bit about the collapse of capitalism as an ideology, internationally, back in January.

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.")

[snip]

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.

But capitalism as an ideology internationally works differently than it does domestically. Internationally, it provides ideological cover for policies that concentrate wealth and create

instability. As uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East show, ultimately reality will intrude and make such policies harder to sustain.

But free market ideology in the US has allowed far more than just anti-worker policies. In the same way our exploitation of democracy as an ideology internationally allowed us to rule through persuasion, working class belief in capitalism paved the way for corporations to take over our government without a fight.

That said, it's unclear where this goes. Where ideology fails, force usually takes its place.

But it does seem like an opportunity. Now if only the left were prepared with a viable "something else" to offer.