

The Obama Effect Undermines the Left

Peter Hudis

April 24, 2010

Interview by Simon Birnbaum with Peter Hudis and Kevin Anderson [Published in German as [“Der Obama-Effekt untergräbt die Linke.”](#) *iz3w* No. 317 (Freiburg, March-April 2010), pp. 33-35]

1. It is evident that Obama will not work for the global abolition of capitalism. But did or do you though pin hopes on his foreign policy?

Peter Hudis:

I did not pin much hope on Obama's foreign policy, since it is important to remember that since becoming a professional politician he has not identified with progressive or leftist causes; in fact, it would be highly inaccurate to even label him a liberal. His political career has consistently displayed the tendency to tack towards the center and avoid the politics of confrontation. True, he is a breath of fresh air compared to Bush, and his election did represent an important shift in race relations, given the persistent racism that has long defined U.S. society. However, Obama's entire career has represented an effort to integrate into and become accepted by mainstream elements of U.S. society, not to challenge them. He made no secret of this in the way he opposed the war in Iraq while doing nothing to challenge traditional U.S. policy on such matters as Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, relations with Latin America, gays in the military, and even the level of funds committed by the U.S. to combat AIDS overseas (he has promised much less than what Bush had committed).

It is also important to keep in mind that for Obama to act differently on foreign policy would require him to directly challenge and oppose the U.S. national security establishment. Iraq is no longer a defining issue for the national security establishment; the consensus among it (and much of the U.S. public) is that the troop surge in Iraq was a success and that the war will be drawn down of its own accord. But this in no way implies that the U.S. national security establishment is any less interested in promoting the U.S. drive for single world domination that it was during the Bush years. Gen. McCrystal, who is largely directing the U.S. effort in Afghanistan, went out of his way to publicly argue for the troop buildup in Afghanistan, even going so far as to insist on increasing troop levels in discussions with NATO before discussing the matter with Obama. The U.S. military did not work hard to try to turn things around in Iraq in order to now declare failure

in Afghanistan. That issue of power and prestige, far more than anything else, explains the decision to send over 30,000 more U.S. troops to a country that (by the military's own estimate) contains less than 100 Al Qaeda fighters. For Obama to oppose the military's demand for a significant build-up of U.S. forces in Afghanistan would have required him to directly oppose the agenda of the very powerful part of the U.S. establishment. Yet everything in his political biography prior to the elections, as well as everything he has done since then, indicates that he is adverse to any such approach. He is an accommodator and a compromiser, not a fighter—even for principles that he fervently believes in, let alone those he does not.

There is another objective component that constrains Obama's actions in foreign policy—the depth of the economic crisis. His trip to Beijing late last year was striking both for his obsequious effort to ingratiate himself with Chinese leaders and avoid any substantive call for the release of political prisoners and respect for human rights on the part of the Chinese government. Compare Obama's actions to Bush, who had refused to even grant an official state dinner to Hu Jintao when he came to visit Washington during his second term and was not averse to openly criticizing its government from time to time. Obama feels he cannot afford to treat the Chinese leadership in such a manner, given the need for continued Chinese financing of the ballooning federal budget and trade deficits.

None of this is to deny that Obama has done much to redress the unilateral and hateful rhetoric of the Bush administration, a fact that has done much to generate intense hopes for him and his administration among people around the world. However, as I see it his approach represents recognition on the part of a substantial section of the ruling elite that the image Bush and Cheney projected in insisting “all who are not with us are against us” proved counter-productive to promoting U.S. interests. Just as it was the opposition of the military establishment and moderate Republicans that called a halt to Joseph McCarthy's witch hunts of the 1950s, so much of the U.S. ruling class has decided that Bush and Cheney's approach was undermining their very aims. But important as is the shift in terms of language and expression, there is little evidence that Obama has ever been at odds with the basic aims of the establishment that he is now the leader of.

The real challenge that the Left faces in the U.S. today is to stake out a principled ground against Obama's policies at the same time as it makes it clear that the greatest threat facing the country today is the growing power of the racist Right, which is helping to infuse the Republican Party with a populist, reactionary agenda. Their effort to paint Obama as part of a “liberal” elite out of touch with the interests of the “common man” is deeply threatening in light of the state of the economy and the extremely high levels of unemployment. No matter what Obama does on the foreign policy front, he will face a growing and increasingly mobilized Right that at the moment is far better organized, unified, and mobilized than are liberals or leftists.

2. If I summarize correctly, Peter, you are more or less saying, the only change so far in U.S. foreign policy after Bush has concerned rhetoric. Let's first have a look on this in a larger perspective: Is it not an aim of the Obama administration – to good or bad account – to remove

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

foreign policy from the neoconservative approach, which especially meant – ideologically – bringing freedom and democracy in the world, and – practically – waging or supporting wars in several parts of the world, all this in an unilateral way?

Peter Hudis:

I would not go as far as say that Obama has made only “rhetorical” changes in U.S. foreign policy. In several speeches he has tried to address the Muslim world in an understanding way, which is quite unprecedented for a U.S. president. While such advances have been mainly verbal, words do have substance in attempting to generate a less tense global environment. On the gist of your question, I do think that Obama wants to move away from major aspects of the neo-conservative approach to foreign policy, since he is less of a unilateralist than Bush and realizes that the projection of U.S. power has to be exerted with greater care. However, I do not think that “bringing freedom and democracy to the world” was ever a part of the neoconservative project. Such claims on their part were pure rhetoric that lacked any substance. If Bush was interested in “bringing freedom and democracy” to the world he wouldn’t have supported Musharaff’s dictatorship in Pakistan and the Saudi monarchy as forcefully as he did. It must not be overlooked that the neocons latched onto the rhetoric of “democracy and freedom” only relatively late in the Bush tenure, after it had become clear that the claim of there being “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq proved to be a mirage. And there were already signs near the end of Bush’s tenure that the administration realized that pursuing its aims through strict unilateralism was proving counter-productive. Obama’s foreign policy represents a further distancing from the crude unilateralism of the original Bush approach, without breaking fundamentally from its overall mission and aims.

Kevin Anderson:

Obama represents some changes to the face of the ruling classes of the U.S. and its empire. On a general level, he is part of the more pragmatist, realist wing of the dominant classes. Moreover, many elements of these classes thought his ethnicity and his international ties to Africa through his family would be a plus after the Bush years, which antagonized even U.S. allies and gave opponents of the U.S. a good “target” against whom to mobilize people.

The results have been very limited so far, however. Probably the best example of the slight change Obama represents could be seen in his Cairo speech addressed to the Muslim world, where he set a different tone from Bush. In addition, he made some small noises critical of Israel, although in the end he did absolutely nothing about Netanyahu’s defiance of his demand that Israel freeze the settlements during negotiations. While he remains very unpopular in Israel, he has in fact not been all that critical. He was silent, for example, during the Gaza War a year ago just as he was about to assume the presidency.

Moreover, he has escalated sharply the war in Afghanistan and the number of attacks inside Pakistan on Al Qaeda and Taliban elements. While some on the Left claim to be shocked or

disappointed, in fact this should not surprise anyone, as he campaigned on the concept of getting out of Iraq not from a pacifist position, but in order to concentrate on the “real” war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nonetheless, many on the Left harbored illusions about Obama. Where he has failed to fulfill even his small campaign promises about breaking with the Bush period of aggressive warfare is on Iraq. There is no sign of any serious withdrawal and it is notable that Obama kept Bush’s Defense (really war) Secretary, Robert Gates, in place.

With regard to Latin America, again there have been some very small changes, most notably a slight toning down of the confrontation with Cuba. But little has come of this, as Obama’s policy is not really that different from that of the U.S. over the past 50 years. The tragic events in Honduras show that fundamentally there is no change from Bush. While Obama engaged in a pro forma criticism of the coup government, nothing serious was done to stop it. Moreover, he undermined the efforts of a united Latin America to confront the coup government by saying that the U.S. would not rule out accepting the results of an election called by the coup government. This election has now happened, whereas even a phone call in serious tone from the U.S. government could have forced a compromise in a very small country like Honduras with its long ties to U.S. state and military interests. Honduras was, after all, the base for Reagan’s Contra War against revolutionary Nicaragua during the 1980s, when it was called a “giant American aircraft carrier.”

On Iran, his more realist and less confrontational policy has actually undermined the regime, making it harder for them to mobilize support on the basis of a threat from the U.S. But his policy of course offers no answer to the real problems of Iran or the region. As a whole, Obama represents a slightly more benign face for the U.S. Empire, but there is not a fundamental change, and not even too many small changes. He has come to office at a time when the U.S. is weakened internationally, not only because of its disastrous wars, but also because the global economic crisis is centered in the U.S., which has given new power to China and other powers.

If the Nobel Prize represents a somewhat illusory hope that he would really work for peace, it also shows just how anxious the world was to get out from under the Bush administration. At the same time, the Obama effect has undermined the U.S. and the global Left, by giving it less of a clear target, especially on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Left also remains very confused about how to oppose the war in Afghanistan and at the same time, stand opposed the reactionary fundamentalism of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Mostly, the Left has confined itself to generalities about ending the war, without dealing with the fact that a return of the Taliban would certainly not improve the lives of the people of Afghanistan. This, along with the Obama effect, seems to have given the global Left pause, as can be seen in the surprising lack of antiwar demonstrations during the entirety of the year 2009. The only exception was the war over Gaza a year ago, but those demonstrations did not deal with Iraq or Afghanistan very much.

3. Isn’t there even a change in U.S. foreign policy, which is in complete contrast to the euphoric view by large parts of the global audience? As you indicated already, Kevin: Against the

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

background of the economic crisis Obama's government e. g. seems to look for a closing of ranks with China – not being so much concentrated on human rights -, economic protectionism is on the agenda – “Buy American” – and global environmental protection seems to be much less important than proclaimed before.

Kevin Anderson:

U.S. foreign policy has evolved somewhat from the grand illusions of the years 2001-03, according to which the U.S. could have reshaped the Middle East (and perhaps even North Korea!) through regime change by military means. But that evolution did not begin with Obama; it had already begun in the last years of the Bush administration, during which the U.S. was forced to accept a semi-fundamentalist Shia Muslim governing group hostile to Israel rather than neoliberal pro-Israel one in Iraq. This followed as a consequence of the fact that the Iraq war – despite a partial turnaround in the last year or so – constitutes the greatest military disaster for the U.S. since Vietnam. The change was expressed in part by the replacement of the flamboyantly militaristic Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense by the dull and bureaucratic Robert Gates. The fact that Gates continues under Obama in the same position underscores that the change from the Bush era has been largely incremental. Of course, all of this is conditioned by the fact that in addition to the U.S.'s isolation abroad, which came earlier, even at home the U.S. public is fed up with military adventurism and economically, the U.S. has been drained by both war and economic crisis. Obama has continued the evolution that began late in the Bush administration, pulling back a bit further on some fronts. One of the clearest shifts from the Bush era can be seen in the fact that Obama has taken a more “realist” position on Iran, where he has toned down the threats of an armed attack by the U.S. or the encouragement of an Israeli one.

4. Kevin, you mentioned “the Obama effect” on the U.S. and global Left and also the confusion of this Left. Under Bush even many radical leftist groups, also in the U.S., concentrated on a simplistic anti-Bushism, often combined with anti-Americanism, cultural relativism, and even anti-Semitism. Ideologies are not eliminated with a new president, but can you observe a more objective debate within the (radical) left now, maybe also against the background of disillusionment about Obama? Which are in your opinion – if there are – interesting groups and voices concerning critique of the current U.S. foreign policy?

Kevin Anderson:

I haven't yet seen much of this type of rethinking in recent months in terms of Afghanistan or Iraq, although it may happen now that the focus has turned to Afghanistan and Pakistan. I think most people on the Left developed their positions 5 or more years ago and have become entrenched, with some falling into the simplistic type of anti-imperialism you mention above and others taking a much more critical position toward the Taliban, Iraqi fundamentalist resistance, etc. within their concept of anti-imperialism. Among the latter are organizations and publications like [Campaign for Peace and Democracy](#), [ZNet](#), Bill Weinberg's [World War 4 Report](#), and the [U.S. Marxist-](#)

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

[Humanists](#), with Peter and I affiliated with the latter. Disillusionment with Obama means that both types of Left will increasingly target him directly, but that alone will not necessarily lead to a more critical form of anti-imperialism.

There has been a lot of heated debate during the past 6 months over the Iranian democratic movement, however, a somewhat related issue. From the beginning of the mass anti-election protests, some crude anti-imperialists debunked the movement as a middle class or elite Western-educated fringe while claiming that Ahmadinejad had actually won. James Petras, a well-known sociologist of Latin America, penned the most blatant of these attempts, and many more were influenced by Hugo Chavez's deplorable embrace of Ahmadinejad. Even the respected journal *Monthly Review* gave a lot of space to such positions on its website, prompting the resignation of Barbara Epstein, one of that journal's best-known editors. In the debate over Iran, however, the critical part of the U.S. Left was in a stronger position. Almost all of the leftist Iranian intellectuals – both at home and abroad – supported the protest movement, and even intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, who had played down their critique of the Taliban or Al Qaeda after September 11, 2001, signed statements supporting the Iranian protests or at least calling for an end to their brutal repression. More comprehensive statements of support and analysis came from within the critical anti-imperialist tendencies I mentioned above. See for example our international Marxist-Humanist statement from last fall, [“Support the Iranian People’s Movement against the Repressive Regime!”](#) See also Frieda Afary's blog, [“Iranian Progressives in Translation”](#) one of many sources from within the Iranian community that are influencing the U.S. Left.

5. And what about the peace movement on the occasion of the “war on terror”? At the beginning of the war in Iraq it was also in the U.S. a mass-movement, but I think – as all over the world – mainly characterized by this annoying mixture of the ideologies mentioned above. Nevertheless many people from the Democratic Party-range were also part of this movement, and made sometimes their first experiences with state violence. Is there anything left of this movement besides the already mentioned confusion within the radical left? Are there still anti-war-demonstrations etc.? Is there any spirit left of this movement within mainstream parts of society?

Peter Hudis:

You are correct that a massive, albeit shortlived, movement against war arose in 2002 and 2003 over Bush's designs on Iraq, and the protests did contain a large variety of people from different backgrounds. However, when it became clear that Bush would not listen to any critics of his Iraq adventure, the size and scale of the protests dropped off dramatically. By the last few years, there was little or nothing of an anti-war movement left to speak of in the U.S. although occasional rallies and marches were held by groupings of the traditional Left. Meanwhile, the Obama campaign led many opponents of the war to put their faith in his election instead of attempting to build or revive active anti-war protests. However, in the past several months there are signs of a renewal of anti-war activities. Many Obama supporters have been shocked by his escalation of the war in Afghanistan, and a number of rallies are planned for this spring. The problem these efforts

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

still face, however, is the need to oppose the U.S. military buildup without making apologies for the Taliban or ignoring the still very real threat of terrorist attacks on the U.S. and elsewhere. For the most part, the anti-war Left has not found a way to deal with both sides of that contradiction.

6. Are there any beginnings of “alternative foreign policy” by the proletarian movement within or besides the familiar marginal groups like the industrial workers of the world on the one, more radical hand, and the official trade unions on the other, more reformist hand?

There have been some efforts along these lines, although they form a minority position within the leftist and antiwar movements. Groups like U.S. Labor Against the War have both opposed the war/occupation of Iraq and supported Iraqi union. They have supported these new independent unions against repression from the U.S./Iraq governments on the one hand, and from fundamentalist groups that have targeted them on the other.

Concerning Afghanistan, where the labor movement is not well developed, there have been similar efforts for years to support secular feminist groups like the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) while also opposing the U.S./NATO war. These issues are coming to the fore again as a result of the escalation of the war in Afghanistan by both the U.S./NATO forces and the Taliban, and the spilling over of the conflict into Pakistan.

The Campaign for Peace and Democracy, mentioned above, will soon issue a statement criticizing the [U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan](#) and has previously issued a statement against war that mentions prominently the danger of the Taliban. Marxist-Humanists based in the U.S. and other countries will soon be issuing a collective statement about the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan that will seriously analyze the fundamentalist threat, while of course devoting most of its space to a critique of war and militarism.

~~~~~

Interview by Simon Birnbaum with Peter Hudis and Kevin Anderson [Published in German as [“Der Obama-Effekt untergräbt die Linke.”](#) *iz3w* No. 317 (Freiburg, March-April 2010), pp. 33-35]

Source: <http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/articles/the-obama-effect-undermines-the-left/>