

Joseph Kay replies to letters on Thomas Friedman, Saddam Hussein and the term “socialist”

3 August 2005

On “New York Times’ Thomas Friedman libels opponents of Iraq war”

I don’t understand why anyone would bother publishing this article. No self-respecting socialists read Thomas Friedman anyway, so why would they be interested in a critique of his worthless opinions? I would think that Joseph Kay and others should employ their talents on more significant targets than Friedman’s latest pail of garbage.

JP

Dear JP,

Even assuming you are correct in saying “no self-respecting socialists read Thomas Friedman,” a highly dubious assertion, that is not a convincing argument for the *World Socialist Web Site* to ignore his writings. The WSWs seeks to influence the thought of many people who do not yet consider themselves socialist. We seek to expose the nature of American liberalism, of which Friedman is only one of the more depraved representatives, as part of an attempt to develop the political consciousness of broad sections of the population.

If we were to follow your line of reasoning, we would refrain from analyzing any statements made by representatives or defenders of the American ruling elite. Should we talk only about what other “socialists” are writing?

This is a narrow conception of political analysis. The task of the WSWs is to explain to an international audience—above all, to the working class—the basic trajectory of society, including the thinking of the layers represented by Mr. Friedman. An analysis of his writings plays an important role in the political education of the working class.

Your letter suggests that we should not deal with Friedman because we socialists are already in the know. In fact, there are many people who, for a variety of complex historical and political reasons, find it difficult on their own to cut through Friedman’s brand of demagoguery and sophistry and reveal the reactionary kernel of his politics. This is, in part, because Friedman’s half-truths and lies are buttressed by and echo the propaganda of the political establishment that is relentlessly pumped out by the media. To refrain from critiquing such forms of disinformation is to absolve ourselves of the responsibility to politically educate the population.

Friedman’s justifications of militarism and imperialism, and his attacks on political opposition to the war in Iraq, are part of a growing attack on democratic rights in the United States and internationally. We cannot be indifferent to this threat. His statement that those who point to the connection between Iraq and the London bombings are “one notch” below the terrorists must serve as a warning of the type of repression the American ruling elite is prepared to carry out.

I find it amazing that Joseph Kay is for hate-mongering and terrorism. His analysis of Thomas Friedman’s article “Giving the Hatemongers No Place to Hide” seems to miss the point Friedman was making. Spreading hate by anyone—Arab, Christian, Jew or anyone else—aggravates the world situation and should be stopped. I am appalled by the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and all the killing that came from them. But I don’t see how blowing up subways in London helps the situation. People who do such things should be condemned, as should the Bush administration for its brutality. Anyone who has a solid view of human history knows that humanity’s hands are bloody. If our race is to survive, we must stop killing each other. The first step in that direction is stopping the hate-mongering, and that is Friedman’s point.

AH

Aurora, Illinois

Dear AH,

I suggest you slow down and consider what you are saying. I am for “hate-mongering and terrorism” because my article denounces Friedman for placing opponents of the Iraq war “one notch” below the terrorists? I am for terrorism because my article defends the conception that it is necessary to explain the origins of terrorism and place blame where blame is due?

Is the doctor who seeks to explain the origins and spread of HIV a supporter of AIDS and purveyor of death? To analyze and explain is not to imply support. By pointing to the responsibility of the American and British governments, we do not thereby condone the terrorist acts themselves. (Our attitude toward such criminal actions is clear from dozens of articles posted on the WSWs.)

By making this argument, you help promote the fundamental lie and amalgam advanced by Friedman. This is a very dangerous path, and it leads right into the camp of those who would seek to prosecute critics of the Bush and Blair administrations as abettors and defenders of terrorism.

Your willingness to defend Friedman is astonishing given your opposition to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. You write, “If our race is to survive, we must stop killing each other.” This is excellent advice. However, one must ask how we are to accomplish this. Certainly, it is not by supporting the likes of Thomas Friedman.

This is a man who has spared no effort in spreading lies and promoting militarism, a man who, during the bombing campaign in Serbia in 1999, came out for the annihilation of the capital city: “It should be lights out in Belgrade,” he declared, and elaborated on this grisly theme: “Every power grid, water pipe, road and war-related factory has to be hit.... [W]e will set your country back by pulverizing

you. You want 1950? We can do 1950. You want 1389? We can do 1389.”

Friedman is the type of individual who can hardly conceal his almost sensual pleasure at the power of American militarism. He is highly selective in deciding what constitutes “hate-mongering.” His moral compass is a remarkably flexible instrument for condemning violence and killing. When it comes to killing people in the pursuit of the geo-strategic interests of American imperialism, he quickly abandons his Gandhian pose.

On “A legal sham: first charges laid against Saddam Hussein”

It is important that one should stand on a high moral pedestal, but why for Saddam Hussein? Just because he is facing Americans? He was their stooge and is now a fallen stooge. Why do the socialists have so much sympathy with people like Saddam? Not only your writings, but also many which appear on the WSWs reinforce a perception that Saddam, Osama, etc., are icons of a legitimate resistance. It is not certain whose interests people like Saddam and Osama are serving, but one thing is sure: They have become tools to kill or suppress systematically all politically legitimate movements of oppressed nations. I think now the major task for the WSWs people should be to resurrect the political and class-based resistance movements which have been hijacked by the icons of Saddam and Osama, and not glorify them.

SI

As the article to which you refer clearly explains, there are a number of reasons why one must oppose the trial of Saddam Hussein. There is first the question of legal principle. From the standpoint of international law and basic democratic rights, the trial is a travesty. Hussein was captured and is being held prisoner by an occupying force that entered Iraq illegally and has no legitimacy to carry out any trial. Hussein has been denied basic rights, including the right to call and question witnesses relevant to his case, such as US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. As we wrote, the trial is a show trial, orchestrated entirely for political reasons, to bolster the position of the Iraqi government and the US occupying forces.

We hold no brief for Hussein. However, we do not cede the task of opposing him to American imperialism. You write that by denouncing the trial of Hussein as a show trial, we “reinforce a perception” that he is an “icon of a legitimate resistance.” Would you have us support a trial organized by a stooge regime beholden to the American military? How would this serve to delegitimize Saddam?

The trial will contribute nothing to the education of the Iraqi people about the true nature of the Saddam Hussein regime or the culpability of the American government in supporting him while he committed many of the acts for which he is now being tried. The prosecution can serve only as a propaganda tool.

We denounce the trial because we oppose the occupation, and no trial by an occupying foreign power can possibly lead to justice. Hussein should be tried, but so should his prosecutors and the individuals in the Bush administration who are currently pulling the strings.

This task can be accomplished only by the Iraqi working class, in collaboration with the working class in the United States and internationally.

We agree that it is absolutely necessary to “resurrect the political and class-based resistance movements,” but the foundation for such a movement must be irreconcilable opposition to the American occupation and all of its manifestations, including the trial of Hussein. These people will be dealt with by a movement of the working class,

in a way that educates workers and promotes class consciousness, not in a way that legitimizes and buttresses a criminal occupation.

On the term “socialism”

I would recommend renaming your web site. The term “socialism” has never been understood by this TV culture. They relate “socialism” to Stalin, Gorbachev, the “Wall,” everything evil the angelic Ron Reagan programmed them to hate.

People want to hear your message, but they are afraid, socially, of the consequences. You have to be a lot better at propaganda if you want to make people listen to your views. Start by dropping the word “socialist.”

JN

Dear JN,

We appreciate your concern, but respectfully disagree with your recommendation. Besides the fact that the name “World Web Site” is amorphous and dull, we have no need to hide our views from our readers.

We are, in fact, socialists, and are proud of it. Why should we avoid using the term? What other words should we abandon? What about “working class,” or “imperialism,” or “the capitalist system?”

The end consequence of your policy of terminological castration would be to completely adapt ourselves to all of the misconceptions that prevail in the general population. And the result? All of these misconceptions would be retained—only we would be complicit in perpetuating them.

There are enormous problems of social consciousness within the American and international working class, a product of decades of betrayals by Stalinism and the Social Democratic parties, combined with relentless propaganda from the ruling elite and the trade union bureaucracy. The task that the WSWs sets for itself is to wage a determined struggle to raise the political consciousness of workers and educate them in the great historical lessons of the twentieth century.

Socialism will not be introduced by verbal trickery, by sneaking it in behind the backs of workers while they are not looking. A socialist movement can base itself only on the highly conscious and active participation of the great majority of the population, actively fighting for this great and historic cause.



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