

Why is American liberalism bankrupt? A history lesson for New York Times columnist Bob Herbert

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New York Times columnist Bob Herbert's September 9 column "Hold Your Heads Up" is a lamentation of US liberalism's cowardice.

Herbert, himself a liberal, is far from alone in noting the submissiveness of liberalism in the face of the Republican right. The current campaign of Barack Obama for the presidency is a case study in just such spinelessness and duplicity.

Herbert writes, "Liberals have been so cowed by the pummeling they've taken from the right that they've tried to shed their own identity, calling themselves everything but liberal and hoping to pass conservative muster by presenting themselves as hyper-religious and lifelong lovers of rifles, handguns, whatever.

"So there was Hillary Clinton, of all people, sponsoring legislation to ban flag-burning; and Barack Obama, who once opposed the death penalty, morphing into someone who not only supports it, but supports it in cases that don't even involve a homicide."

The obvious question that arises from Herbert's description of a prostrate liberalism and supine Democratic Party—a question that tens of millions the world over who hate the Bush administration are asking themselves—is *why*. Why is US liberalism incapable of waging a struggle against the right? Or, as Herbert rhetorically puts it, "Why liberals don't stand up to this garbage, I don't know."

But Herbert doesn't tarry on this dilemma. Posing it, he throws up his hands and changes the subject—to history. Addressing himself to fellow liberals, he presents a version of history in which liberalism has been the sole vehicle of social reform.

This reveals a serious misunderstanding of US history. Herbert omits the most important elements of historical development: the role of economic and social change and the centrality of the independent struggles of the working class.

According to Herbert, liberals "from the mightiest presidents to the most unheralded protesters and organizers" have been responsible for, among other things, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, civil rights and the end of segregation, always fighting tooth and nail against conservatives. Where has this golden age of liberalism gone? Herbert seems to ask.

In fact, it never existed. The limited reformist achievements that Herbert outlines were not the result of liberalism, but of the mass social struggles of the working class to which liberalism, under certain historical conditions, adapted itself and made grudging concessions.

From its origins in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Europe and the United States, liberalism was the ideology of the bourgeoisie. Its early political legitimacy rested on its claim to speak for the

productive elements of the entire nation—in France this was called the "Third Estate" of bourgeoisie, peasants and workers—aligned in social revolution against feudal elements in society: the royalty, the clergy and the landed gentry. Yet, in spite of its claims, from the beginning liberalism expressed in politics and economy the aims of the bourgeoisie. What this meant in practice was the domination of the state by capitalism, the breaking down within the nation of feudal barriers to the capitalist market, and the subjugation of the working class.

As opposed to European nations, liberalism in the US over the course of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century gradually took on a social-reformist coloring. After the defeat of the South in the Civil War, the liberal vision of the national market triumphed.

This was not precisely a "free market," but the protection and domination of the domestic market by US capitalism. But liberalism's *political* purchase on middle class elements—the small farmers, shopkeepers and professionals—allowed it to simultaneously present itself as the defender of democracy against the tyranny of the market, a tendency that manifested itself in both the farmers' Populist movement of the 1890s and the Progressive movement of the early 20th century, whose ranks were filled with middle-class professionals and technical experts.

At the same time, liberalism reacted with hostility to the development of the working class and its epic strikes, union movements and struggles for socialism which unfolded from the 1870s through the 1930s, and which placed a serious challenge before the bourgeoisie and a question mark over its political control. The liberal state's response of choice to this challenge from the working class was force: the use of private guards, strike-breakers, police, militias and the courts to crush strikes and imprison, terrorize or kill the leadership of the working class. The class struggle in the US in this period was among the most sanguinary in the world.

It must never be forgotten that it was the liberal icon, Woodrow Wilson, who imprisoned the leader of US socialism, Eugene Debs, then an elderly man, for opposing American entry into World War I. The Wilson administration whipped up the first Red Scare in the aftermath of the war, and was responsible for the imprisonment and deportation of thousands of immigrant radicals.

But, utilizing its democratic elements, liberalism relied on the carrot as well as the stick, advancing a limited reformist agenda—increasingly through the political mechanism of the Democratic Party—and relying upon middle class layers for its social constituency.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, American capitalism

faced a mortal crisis. Workers waged massive unionization struggles and strikes, very often led by socialists and communists. As an ideology, socialism had significant influence on the thinking of workers, intellectuals and artists. Given these conditions—the growing organized strength of the working class, the threat posed by socialism, the economic disaster wrought by the Great Depression—Franklin Delano Roosevelt dragged the ruling class, kicking and screaming, along a path of a quite limited reformism.

At the height of this crisis, the failure of liberalism was laid bare by its own leading philosopher and intellectual, John Dewey, who penned a series of lectures delineating its fatal contradiction—that between the economic “liberty” of monopoly capitalists to exploit and the liberty of the masses to live a full life. What Dewey described was in essence the polarization of the Third Estate, or the shattering of the bourgeoisie’s claims to speak for the nation.

Dewey recognized that “the tragic breakdown of democracy is due to the fact that the identification of liberty with the maximum of unrestrained individualistic action in the economic sphere, under the institutions of capitalistic finance, is as fatal to the realization of liberty for all as it is to the realization of equality.” Dewey could *think* liberalism out of this dilemma, proposing a system of public ownership, but he rejected the very existence of a class struggle and was opposed to the independent movement of the working class. His plans never got off the drawing board.

There is a colossal irony in Herbert’s column. He laments the reactionary political climate before which Democratic politicians like Obama and Clinton now grovel. However, this climate of reaction and ignorance is the end result of a process that liberalism itself set into motion with the anticommunist hysteria of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

After the end of World War II, US liberalism turned against its allies in the Stalinist Communist Party and began a purge of left elements in government, organized labor, culture and academia.

This was not because liberalism had become disgusted with the crimes of Stalin. On the contrary, during the blood purges of the late 1930s, in which Stalin exterminated the entire revolutionary generation in the Soviet Union, US liberalism—including its journalistic flagships the *Nation* and the *New Republic*—defended Stalin and his show trials.

What had changed were the imperialist interests of the United States. Liberalism and the Democratic Party broke their alliance with the Communist Party and its fellow travelers because the Soviet Union was now viewed as the primary obstacle to the unfettered projection of US imperialism abroad. This shift caught Stalin and the Communist Party in the US unawares. As a token of good faith, they carried on the Popular Front-style class subordination of workers to the bourgeoisie that had prevailed in the Roosevelt years, even as the earlier political alignment came crashing down all around them.

President Harry Truman, another liberal icon, launched the Red Scare in 1948 as a means of banishing domestic opposition to the program of US imperialism abroad and taming the American working class, which emerged in the immediate postwar period more combative than ever. A substantial section of the liberal intelligentsia adapted itself to the Red Scare and contributed its ideological labor to the project of US imperialism, many of its ranks joining the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, which was associated with the CIA-funded Congress of Cultural Freedom. The role of these organizations was to provide intellectual legitimacy to anticommunism, which had hitherto been considered a marginal or reactionary outlook.

The enlistment of liberal intellectuals’ labor was not accidental. It reflected their class position and the extraordinary wealth of US capitalism, which was busy hiring intellectuals in the state bureaucracies, saturating the universities with money, and founding anticommunist “think tanks” and endowments.

The anticommunist campaign created a toxic cultural and intellectual environment. It appealed to the worst instincts in the population—backwardness, ignorance, religious superstition, hatred and fear. Anticommunism soon became the secular religion of the US.

These reactionary characteristics of official political life have only festered over the last 60 years. The end result can be witnessed in the current presidential election, where Barack Obama and the liberal elements of the news media cannot openly address the theo-fascistic political outlook of Sarah Palin, the Republican vice presidential candidate, for fear of inciting a whirlwind of condemnation.

As for the Civil Rights legislation of the 1950s and 1960s, which took place in the context of the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union for influence in the Third World, historical evidence has made it abundantly clear that the liberal presidents of the period—Truman (Dem.) Dwight Eisenhower (Rep.), John Kennedy (Dem.) and Lyndon Johnson (Dem.)—only reluctantly acceded to certain demands of a movement that was comprised largely of poor blacks in the South. The civil rights reforms revolved primarily around the legal and quasi-legal oppression of the black population in the South and left untouched the question of social and economic equality that animated the freedom movement.

Liberalism’s attempt to balance a limited reformism in the US with imperialism abroad came to a bloody end in the Vietnam War and the urban riots of the late 1960s during the Johnson administration. It had fallen victim to the same contradiction that Dewey had studied in the 1930s. It could not bridge the chasm between the monopolist outlook of the moneyed elite—the project of imperialism—and the social needs of the working class—the project of social reform.

Then, before the flames of 1968 had even been extinguished, the economic decline of the US, which came to a head in the 1970s as a result of the Vietnam War and the reemergence of America’s capitalist rivals, eroded the basis of economic reform, which had been made possible by the expansion of the productive forces from the 1940s to the 1960s.

The collapse of liberal reformism and its intellectual bankruptcy, which is on full display in the Herbert column, is the end result of long historical processes. Liberalism was never a tendency that advanced the needs of the working class. Rather, in the 20th century it sought to forestall fundamental change through a limited reformist agenda in order to better carry out the imperialist aims of US capitalism. This balancing act proved impossible.



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