Journalist Glenn Greenwald speaks in California

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Glenn Greenwald's recent speeches on the West Coast exhibited many of the strengths—and some of the same limitations—as his recent book *No Place to Hide* (reviewed here). Greenwald is currently touring the United States to promote his book.

Last Thursday, he spoke at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center in Los Angeles. He was greeted by a standing ovation in the sold-out auditorium, with one organizer estimating attendance as high as 850. Many people stood in the aisles and crammed the balconies.

When Greenwald speaks in the first person about the struggle that he conducted alongside National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden and a small group of other journalists to expose the NSA's illegal activities, it is easy to see why he has attracted a substantial following. In Los Angeles, the mere mention of Snowden's name evoked spontaneous applause from the audience, which consisted mostly of young people.

As a journalist and critic, Greenwald is at his best when defending Snowden against the deceitful attacks by the Obama administration and various media personalities.

In his speech in Los Angeles, Greenwald pointed out that Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper, who was caught lying to Congress about the NSA's spying, is guilty of perjury—no less a felony crime than anything that Snowden is accused of doing. Those who are invoking the "rule of law" in relation to Snowden have nothing to say about the Obama administration's refusal to prosecute Clapper.

Greenwald repeatedly mocked President Obama for the official lies about the NSA and his promises to "rein in" surveillance. He contrasted the "marketing and branding" of Obama with "who he really is," i.e., the most ferocious persecutor of whistleblowers in American history.

Greenwald devoted special attention to the US media's presentation of Snowden, including the baseless accusations that Snowden was a "Russian spy" (or, at one point, a "Chinese spy"), reports that Snowden was a "fame-seeking narcissist," and the argument that NSA surveillance on the American population has anything to do with the so-called "war on terror." The vast majority of what is published by the mainstream media is factually untrue, Greenwald said, attacking the official lineup of talking heads as "actors who play journalists on TV."

He defended Snowden's decision to disclose NSA surveillance as a "pure act of conscience." Snowden, Greenwald said, "did not want to live the rest of his life knowing that he was confronted with this great injustice, and he had the opportunity to do something about it, and he did nothing."

Greenwald denounced the media campaign to portray Snowden, Julian Assange, Chelsea (Bradley) Manning and other dissenters as somehow psychologically sick or pursuing subjective personal motives. "What is more psychologically healthy," Greenwald asked, "going along with the government's crimes or exposing them?"

Greenwald spoke passionately about the harmful effects of surveillance on the individual. He pointed out that the harm of surveillance is not merely that private communications are intercepted by the government, but that many people, if they believe they are being monitored, simply will not express their private thoughts in the first place.

Some of the most thoughtful passages in Greenwald's book address these issues. In one passage, Greenwald quotes from an artist who was targeted

during the period of blacklists in Hollywood, describing "the dynamic of oppressive self-censorship that comes from the sense of being watched." Greenwald denounces "the pernicious controlling power of ubiquitous surveillance and the self-censorship that results..."

"Mass surveillance," Greenwald writes in his book, is "inherently repressive, even in the unlikely case that it is not abused by vindictive officials to do things like gain private information about political opponents. Regardless of how surveillance is used or abused, the limits it imposes on freedom are intrinsic to its existence."

Privacy, Greenwald argues, is essential for creativity, expression, exploration, contemplation, identity, freedom—and dissent. Referring to the NSA, he said, "Any structure built by human hands can be torn down and replaced by other human hands."

Notwithstanding these welcome sentiments present in his writings and speeches, Greenwald is at his weakest when he attempts to draw broader political conclusions from the exposures he has helped to make.

At one point during his speech in Los Angeles, Greenwald posed the question, "Why hasn't anything changed?" He acknowledged that the NSA was continuing to engage in all of the practices that he had exposed, with no significant section of the American political establishment demanding an end to them. If anything, mass surveillance is becoming more and more entrenched.

Greenwald appeared unable to answer his own question. As possible "avenues for change," he listed a vague "coalition of other countries" that would in the future pressure the US government to discontinue its mass surveillance. Another option, according to Greenwald, was that "tech companies" and "pressure on the US government" from "tech company billionaires" would lead to reforms.

(Perhaps included on Greenwald's list of progressive tech company billionaires is eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, who recently financed Greenwald's new media company First Look Media to the tune of $250 million.)

Sadly, the mobilization of the great mass of the population—in the US and internationally—was not listed anywhere among Greenwald's possible "avenues for change." Indeed, Greenwald's focus on the individual psychological consequences of surveillance tends to suggest that he considers the majority of the population to be hopelessly brainwashed by the media and the NSA surveillance programs he describes.

In the place of mass struggles, Greenwald sees the electrifying "acts of conscience" of heroic individuals such as Snowden, Manning, Assange and others as the main path to progress. The working class does not appear to have any progressive role to play.

In this light, it is no coincidence that Greenwald's speaking tour was organized in coordination with Haymarket Books, which is affiliated with the International Socialist Organization (ISO). Greenwald has spoken several times at ISO conferences, and his praise for these conferences has been featured prominently in the organization's promotional material.

Greenwald's analysis of the roots of what he describes as the "surveillance state" was limited in his speeches to denunciations of the "warped minds" of NSA leaders. He did not attempt to make any connection between the growth of the police-state apparatus and attacks on democratic rights, social inequality, historical context, militarism or war. (In his book, at least, Greenwald takes up some of these issues briefly.)

Glenn Greenwald has performed an invaluable service to working people all around the world by helping Snowden to expose the global surveillance complex that has been built up behind their backs. Personal courage was certainly involved in these exposures. In the face of calls for his prosecution, the seizure and detention of his partner, and a police raid on the newspaper he was working for, Greenwald has earned his popularity as a critic of the propaganda that passes for journalism in the 21st century.

But insofar as his own ideas emerge in the sphere of political conceptions, they reveal themselves to be at best little more than those of a classical democrat and reformer who does not see the possibility (or necessity) of a radical social transformation to be carried out by the international working class.