

After vacation with billionaires

Obama returns to Chicago to promote “civic engagement”

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In his first public appearances since leaving the White House, former President Barack Obama made two stops in Chicago, his former home, to urge young people to become involved in politics and community life. Both were small, closely managed affairs with little public interaction, and the proceedings at times veered into the absurd.

Obama’s first public event was held on Sunday in the neighborhood of Roseland, where he was invited by his former secretary of education Arne Duncan to speak with young men on reducing gang violence. In a widely-publicized event at the University of Chicago Monday, Obama led a discussion among six Chicago area high school and university students and an invited audience.

Obama’s statements revealed the immense disconnect between the Democratic Party and the vast majority of the population, in particular those he was purportedly aiming to reach.

Post-presidential mythmaking is in full swing, and Monday’s event had moments of unintended humor. The student who introduced Obama, Richard Omoniyi-Shoyoola, compared Obama’s life to those of Frederick Douglass and Theodore Roosevelt.

Obama spoke to his young aspiring political operatives on stage with him: “The single most important thing I can do is to help in any way prepare the next generation of leadership to take up the baton and to take their own crack at changing the world.”

Obama’s appearance is in line with the Democratic Party’s effort in the wake of the 2016 elections to somehow bolster support for the Democratic Party and the political system as a whole. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders is currently touring the country with Democratic National Committee chair Tom Perez for

the same purpose.

What was most striking about Obama’s appearance was its political impotence. This is not surprising. As a presidential candidate in 2008, Obama appealed to young people with empty promises of “hope” and “change,” only to oversee an enormous transfer of wealth to the rich, unending war and the further destruction of democratic rights. The resulting widespread disillusionment with the Democratic Party and official politics helped Trump win the presidency last November.

In referring to the numerous social problems young people face, Obama had strikingly little to say: “Yes, we confront a whole range of challenges, from economic inequality and lack of opportunity, to the criminal justice system to climate change to issues related to violence. All those problems are serious, they’re daunting, but they’re not insoluble. What is preventing us from tackling them and making more progress really has to do with our politics and our civic life.”

Obama made the claim that the political situation is being made worse by individualism, which has undermined involvement in civic groups like Rotary Club or Parent Teacher Associations. Apparently all the problems in the world will be solved if only more people go to PTA meetings.

He attributed the political divisions in the US to special interests, gerrymandered districts and apathetic young people. Rather than acknowledge that whole swaths of the population are alienated from official politics because it serves social interests hostile to their own, Obama suggested that it is, in part, American disinterest in politics that is to blame: “When I said in

2004 that there were no red states or blue states, there are United States of America, that was an aspirational comment ... [O]bviously, it's not true when it comes to our politics and our civic life, and maybe more pernicious is the fact that people just aren't involved. They get cynical, and they give up."

A recent survey published by Runaway Inequality Educational Network indicates that significant majorities of respondents 18 to 40 years old support a radical transformation of social life in America to include heavily subsidized health care, free education, higher taxes on financiers, increased workplace rights, citizenship rights for immigrants and prison reform, among other social improvements.

Obama, who could speak in no meaningful way to any of these issues, is far removed from the conditions and problems most young people in Chicago and across the United States confront. The Obamas have spent the last several months vacationing on super-yachts and at posh tropical resorts with some of the world's wealthiest entertainment businessmen and stars, including David Geffen, Richard Branson, Oprah Winfrey and Bruce Springsteen.

Widely noted in the press was the fact that Obama said nothing in either of his appearances about Trump. He only indirectly referred to the issues of immigrant deportation and the Democratic Party's losses in the 2016 elections. This was reported to have created some tension at the University of Chicago event, and the question-and-answer period was cut short after just two questions.

Obama reportedly said his silence on Trump is modeled on George W. Bush's decision not to criticize Obama after Bush left office. What it clearly reflects is the unanimity within the ruling class on basic issues of policy, however bitter the divisions may be on certain matters—and in particular on foreign policy. After Trump's election, Obama declared that the elections were merely an "intramural scrimmage" and that "we're all on the same team."

At least this much was true.



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