

Barack Obama and the Idea of a Left

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The paper situates the current primary and election campaign in the US in the context of "the idea of a left," an idea that has been, in the US and to a certain extent in Europe and Asia, forgotten, suppressed or become obsolete. The paper first describes the idea of a left in general, rather than any particular left, distinguishes the traditional idea of change (restoration in the interest of justice) from the modern, which involves structural transformation, explores the core left value of equality and argues that the left/liberal relation, not the left/right relation is the key historical determinant in modernity -- and that liberalism and the left need one another, liberalism becoming spineless without a left, the left becoming unprincipled by itself.

This perspective is then applied to the US Democratic Party and especially its response to the the impeachment of Bill Clinton in 1998, the stealing of the 2000 election and the invasion of Iraq. These events precipitated the struggle for the Democratic legacy. At first, supporters of the Clinton administration and their current opponents were joined in opposition to the right. For example, Moveon.org was created to fight the Clinton impeachment. However, in the early twentieth century a divide opened. The Internet especially provided a pathway for Democratic insurgents who began to blame the vacillations and compromises of the Clinton administration for opening the way for the Republicans. The support of roughly half of the Democrats, including Hillary Clinton, for Bush's 2002 authorization to use force in Iraq, proved a turning point. Ultimately, Barack Obama won the contest for the Democratic Presidential nomination because he spoke to this conflict most directly. By contrast Hillary Clinton, a Democratic Party insider who was herself already a target of the Dean insurgency, began her campaign by identifying with the "third way" revolution in the Democratic Party, including its uncritical embrace of the market, and casual manipulation of symbols of identity, (itself based on marketing techniques). John Edwards, on the other hand, resurrected the older paradigm of the Democratic Party, which charged the government, and especially the president, with advocating for the disadvantaged, and serving as a counterweight to big business. Obama, however, tried to articulate a third possibility, which seemed to echo Rousseau's idea of the "general will," as distinguished from the "will of all." In doing so, he gave voice to the Democratic insurgency and turned it into a narrow majority within the party, and potentially within the country. However, this attempt to articulate a general will is subject to the great divide between white women and black men.