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The Corporate Liberal in America

By Jason Hirthler
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“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s greatest stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from a Birmingham Jail

Whether seated in Congress or exiting a voting booth, a corporate liberal is someone who supports anything progressive that does not challenge corporate power. In practice, this means corporate liberals will fight for progressive identity politics. If it has to do with race, sexual orientation, and gender, it generally doesn't challenge corporate power. Major corporations support progressive positions on those issues, too. Corporate liberals march for gay rights and the larger LGBTQ community itself. They support feminism. They support reproductive rights. They support African-American protests against police brutality—up to the point where they become threatening to the establishment. (Bill Clinton did initiate the prison industrial complex that unduly incarcerates huge numbers of minorities.)

This support is all to the good. Tremendous progress has been made by popular protest of the devastating prejudices that have for years denied individual rights. But when their elected Democrats undermine economic justice, promote imperial warfare, and refuse to seriously address climate change, corporate liberals just look the other way. As Joe Clifford noted in his piece on Bernie Sanders, being a corporate liberal also means rejecting, "...a ban on fracking, a proposal to oppose TPP, the \$15 per hour minimum wage proposal, a call for single-payer health care, and a statement of opposition to the illegal Israeli occupation." These proposals, courageously put forward by James Zogby, Bill Mckibben, Cornell West and the rest of the Sanders contingent at the recent Democratic Platform Committee meeting in Washington, were all struck down. In a beautiful expression of moral courage, West refused to back the platform in its final iteration, saying,

"[If] we can't say a word about [Trans-Pacific Partnership], if we can't talk about Medicare for all explicitly, if the greatest prophetic voice dealing with impending ecological catastrophe can hardly win a vote and if we can't even acknowledge occupation as something that's real in the lives of a slice of humanity ... it just seems to me there's no way in good conscience I can say take it to the next stage."

Yada Yada Yada

Words like these have no effect on the corporate liberal. If there's a centimeter's difference between their Democratic platform and the diseased corpus of Republican anarchism, the corporate conscience is salved. A corporate liberal is the one that puts "occupation" in quotes. A corporate liberal never makes the perfect the enemy of the good. A corporate liberal believes in reform, in humanitarian warfare, in the responsibility to protect, and in *The New York Times* front page. A corporate liberal supports all of this, though reform may be glacial, though good wars may slay millions, though interventions may undermine sovereignty, and though *The Times* may be rife with half-truth. It makes no difference, so long as reform is better than rollback, Barack's slaughter is numerically less than Dubya's, and *The Washington Post* is marginally more truthful than FOX News. As long as you can trust Erin Burnett more than Bill O'Reilly, it makes no difference that we will move further and further to the right, picking up steam until we barrel straight into corporate fascism. So long as the corporate liberal sits to the left of the patrician publican, he has some claim on the progressive mandate. Or so he says. Yet the best way to repel fascism, and realize that progressive mandate, is by joining a movement headed left, rather than a party moving right.

Nothing Forbidden

As Alan Nasser elucidates, there is nothing intolerable in the lesser evilism of the corporate liberal. He will endure—or more likely, watch others endure—intolerable realities while maintaining the unblinking rectitude of the blind ideologue. Author Chris Hedges writes that capitalism is “plunging us into a state of neo-feudalism, perpetual war, ecological disaster, and a dystopian nightmare.” But this, too, is not intolerable. We must accept it in order to ensure that the *real nightmare*—whomever happens to be running on the Republican ticket—is barred from the White House forever.

We must tolerate whatever Democrats do because they are better than Republicans. Even if that means, as it surely has and surely will, for all the identity groups corporate liberals support, a deteriorating quality of life. Lower incomes, higher unemployment. Bigger debts, bullshit jobs. Higher infant mortality, higher heart disease. More inequality, less social support. Less social support, more incarceration. More suicide, more alcoholism, more drug abuse, more debt, more stress, more unhappiness. And, if one is aware enough, the consciousness of having—perhaps unwittingly at the time—for more slaughter of brown people abroad, and the deliberate aggression against nuclear powers that will raise the prospect of nuclear extermination for millions. The Democrats have no such mandate, but the corporate liberal gives them the power to pretend they do. These are the wages of neoliberalism and imperialism, enabled by the logic of the lesser evil.

Like Dr. King, Karl Marx understood the major threat was not the fanatic on the fringe, but the moderate in the middle. The real threat is not the extremist, who will burn out by necessity if not already burned down by the moderate herd. It is the moderate herd that threatens to permit the intolerable through gradualism. Incremental genocide. Slow-motion regime change. The soft coup. The generational heist of millions of working class jobs. The decade-long liquidation of working class home equity. The century-long evisceration of labor rights. The hidden decades of disinformation campaigns that conflate freedom with free markets. Marx said, “Our task is that of ruthless criticism, and much more against ostensible friends than against open enemies.” He understood what King did, which is part of the reason why they are two of the most revolutionary figures of the last couple of centuries of Western civilization.

Too Much to Lose

Corporate liberals rehearse Manichean pieties about good and evil locked in a dualistic embrace, fighting to the death. There are no third parties in this vision. It is a necessary dualism. Hence the occasional need to undermine democracy to save it, as Hillary’s campaign demonstrated through repeated voting irregularities and financial chicanery engineered through her DNC front. It’s just simpler that way. For a political party of millionaires backed by billionaires, it just doesn’t do to disturb the status quo, rock the boat, upset the apple cart, shake the foundations, incite protest, disturb our creature comforts, move us out of our comfort zone, spark rebellion, overthrow the system, or change the world.

Is lesser evilism an elaborate rationale for preserving the status quo? Lenin said you can’t make a revolution in white gloves, and there are plenty of corporate liberals paying lip service to

progress while glad-handing its well-heeled antagonists. That is why, in the end, corporate liberals are anti-revolutionaries. They would rather save capitalism than endure a potentially messy transition to socialism. Leave the revolution to Universal Studios and stubble-cheeked Third World rebels in hand-knitted berets. Social reforms in capitalist countries seem to happen like they did in South Africa, where identity politics achieve astounding successes, and calls for economic justice are swallowed up in the celebratory din. This is because corporate power cares deeply about economic power, but couldn't care less about your sexual identity. For corporations—even if the executive board morally supports it—the gay community is ultimately another target market, a rich source of disposable income to be mined.

The least oppressed in any electorate always seem to be the greatest obstacle to change. Always willing to put justice on layaway. Always arguing for incrementalism, which strikes me as a luxury of the leisure class. Social progress will have little impact on them anyway, but paying lip service to its values will burnish their reputation. The discomfiting appearance of Bernie Sanders disturbed the polished script rehearsed by the Hillary camp for years. It was her turn, the first female president, upholding the rights of the vulnerable and achieving hard-won incremental gains through patience, hard work, and political acumen. For a moment, the Hillary faithful looked harried, wrong-footed, and exposed to the will of the mob. But now that the dodgy primaries are done, and Bernie has scampered back to the warmth of the herd, we can return to the language of compromise and the lesser evil. Had Bernie broke with the party he refused to technically join for 40 years, joined Jill Stein on the Green ticket, garnered support from voices like Kshama Sawant and movements like Socialist Alternative and Black Lives Matter, he could have founded a serious alternative to the mercenary duopoly. But he fell for the ruse of internal reform. But not everyone does. King continued in his Birmingham letter to discuss the white moderate, saying he was the one,

“... who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a “more convenient season.” Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

Sound familiar? King's white moderate and Marx's ostensible friend is our corporate liberal. Same spin, different decade. The corporate liberal is an embodiment of the idea that political parties are the graveyards of movements. Hedges himself wrote a book called, “Death of the Liberal Class” five years ago. It should've been the elegy before the interment of the Democratic Party as a serious option in electoral politics. Yet here we are, about to anoint another corporate liberal to the highest seat in the land. In that case, consider this article yet another epitaph awaiting its headstone. Let's hope it's not a long wait. Voices like Sawant's and the momentum of movements like BLM give us reason to think it won't be.