Barack Obama and the Promise of Liberal Pragmatism

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During his first presidential term, Obama’s policies faced criticism from every quarter. While those on the right charged that “Barack Obama is a socialist” (Sarah Palin) plotting to “destroy the free enterprise system in America” (Pat Robertson), disaffected liberals attacked the President as a “black puppet of corporate plutocrats” (Cornel West) and complained about being “punked” (Frank Rich).

At issue is Obama’s progressivism, which seems too radical to some and too tepid to others. Obama’s pragmatism that strikes many critics as spineless is another oft-mentioned concern. Situating the President within these historical currents may help explain why his initiatives have stalled and what can be done to vindicate the promise of pragmatic liberalism.

It took more than an economic crisis to trigger the progressive reforms at the turn of the 20th century. This historical juncture was marked by a widespread belief that the social contract binding Americans was unraveling. The United States, a country that prided itself on its democratic institutions, allowed monopolies to stamp out competition, gave a pass to businesses selling adulterated food, left out in the cold disabled workers, tolerated child labor in the name of freedom of contract, and created the extreme inequality of wealth. It is this perception of injustice that set in motion the Progressive Movement and ignited what Jane Addams called the “passion for the equalization of human joys and opportunities.”

Civil rights alone, progressives concluded, could not guarantee human dignity. A measure of economic well-being and educational opportunity is imperative for a democratic society, or as John Dewey put it, “actual and concrete liberty of opportunity and action is dependent upon equalization of the political and economic conditions under which individuals are alone free in fact, not in some metaphysical way.” From this desire to socialize opportunity and limit the power of big business grew the most important progressive reforms – the Interstate Commerce Commission, Federal Reserve Act, Adamson Act, Workmen’s
Compensation Program, Food and Drug Law, Electoral reforms, and Women’s suffrage.

Ask those deploring Obama’s politics which progressive reforms they wish to roll back, and you are likely to draw a blank. Instead, you will be served with broadsides that “progressivism exists to justify a few people bossing around most people” (George Will), that it is “all about progressing, or moving beyond, the principles of our founders” (Glenn Beck). Such vapid generalities do little more than obscure the fact that progressivism is the main reason political radicalism failed to strike root in America.

In the early 20th century, socialists made serious inroads in American politics. They claimed the support of five daily papers, 250 weeklies, fifty mayors, and one congressman, as they polled close to a million votes in the presidential election – not enough to become a mainstream party but sufficient to make their opponents worry. This political sea change alarmed Woodrow Wilson, who warned his audience during the 1912 presidential campaign, “I need not tell you how many men were flocking over to the standard of the Socialists, saying neither party any longer bears aloft an ancient torch of liberty.” Nor did Theodore Roosevelt overstate the case when he claimed, “I am well aware that every upholder of privilege, every hired agent or beneficiary of the special interests, including many well-meaning parlor reformers, will denounce this [Progressive platform] as Socialism’. While endorsing their adversaries’ emancipatory agenda, the progressives rejected their radical means, and it is this ingenious attempt to secure socialist goals within the constitutional framework of American democracy that forms progressivism’s most enduring legacy.

Those unhappy about Obama’s progressivism tend to overlook another trenchant characteristic of this movement – its gritty experimentalism. It is no accident that John Dewey, a renowned progressive reformer, was also a major figure in pragmatist philosophy that judges ideas by their consequences rather than provenance. Pragmatic and anti-doctrinaire, progressives recognized that the principles we swear by work at cross-purpose – push liberty too far and you chip away at equality; press individualism to the extreme and the community spirit
suffers; leave the market to its own devices and it will breed monopolies, stifle competition, and self-destruct. Reconciling competing values is the trademark of historical progressivism.

Pragmatic liberalism radically changed the landscape of American politics. Its lessons periodically fell into disuse, only to be rediscovered and reapplied – first during the Great Depression, then in the 1960s, and once again in our own time when the economic disparities have reached levels unknown since the early decades of the 20th century. Today, the progressive spirit is strongly felt in the Communitarian movement whose supporters lead the nation in a conversation about a democracy that leaves ample room for free enterprise and at the same time taps institutional resources to help those on society’s margins to join the pursuit of happiness.

Barack Obama’s communitarian agenda and progressive sensibilities took shape during his days as a community organizer in Chicago, and they were on full display in the keynote address he delivered in 2004 at the Democratic National Convention: “There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America; there’s the United States of America.” Two years later Obama published The Audacity of Hope where he hailed “the pragmatic, nonideological attitude of the majority of Americans,” scoffed at “the rigid orthodoxy [that] keeps us locked in ‘either/or’ thinking,” and urged “finding the right balance between our competing values.”

That Obama remains committed to the progressive legacy is evident in his second Inaugural with its interlocking themes of freedom measured by responsibility, commitment to principle enlivened by practical wisdom. Critics on the right have been quick to condemn this vision as “reactionary liberalism” rooted in a collectivist utopia (Charles Krauthammer), but the followers of Jane Addams and John Dewey know this claim to be bogus. Progressives are committed to socializing opportunity, not rewards; regulating corporate excess, not personal initiative; increasing government effectiveness, not its size; entitling citizens to a dignified existence, not handouts; and shoring up liberty and justice rather than dogmatic collectivism. In short, progressivism is an ongoing attempt to save capitalism from its hubris.
This is not to deny that historical progressivism had blind spots of its own, and those loomed large during Obama’s first presidential term. Progressives pride themselves on their civic spirit and count on deliberative democracy to deliver reform, yet it wasn’t public dialogue spearheaded by do-gooders that set in motion the Progressive movement – it was the Haymarket Rebellion, drawn-out labor strikes, and the relentless drive to unionize. The history of progressivism teaches us that public dialogue is no substitute for flesh and blood politics.

This is why it is a good portend that Obama has dropped the mantra about bridging the red-blue divide and is now invoking the spirit of “Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall.” The question is whether he drew the right lessons from these pivotal events in American politics.

The Seneca Falls Convention issued a women’s rights manifesto in 1848, yet it was nearly 70 years later when women activists took to the streets and found themselves arrested and force-fed in prison that the nation’s conscience was pricked hard enough for Congress to move on women’s suffrage. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 promised to put an end to racial discrimination, but it took the Selma to Montgomery march, a.k.a. Bloody Sunday, to turn public opinion around on the issue of race. The Stonewall riots followed the same pattern – rampant homophobia, antigay violence, brutal police raids continued until 1969 when gay activists summoned their courage to battle for their rights.

Such political actions demonstrate what Obama’s critics on the left have argued all along – you must engage in direct action and lead a movement to bring about change we can believe in. Waiting for public opinion to swing behind a good cause is not enough.

Pragmatism is another facet of historical progressivism open to criticism. More than once Obama found himself attacked for his eagerness to compromise with his opponents. According to Robert Reich, the President “wants a deal above all else and seems willing to compromise on even the most basic principle.” “Will he go big and highlight his sharp differences with Republicans,” bristles Jackie Calmes, “or will he be pragmatic and downsize his ideas to get Republican votes?”
A closer look at the compromises Obama struck in the name of pragmatism helps distinguish pragmatism steeped in principle from opportunism and triangulation.

Midway through Obama’s term, the Bush tax cuts were set to expire, giving Obama a chance to make good on his campaign promise to keep the tax burden low for 95% of Americans and raise it for those earning $250,000 and more. With the economy sputtering, Democrats losing a filibuster-proof Senate majority, and the Republicans vowing to let taxes rise for every American, Obama agreed to reauthorize tax cuts in exchange for extending payroll deductions and unemployment benefits. Critics called the agreement an “abomination,” but the deal kept the economic recovery on track and boosted Obama’s chances for reelection – not an unreasonable calculation from the pragmatist standpoint.

Obama would get two more chances to drive a stake through the Bush-era tax cuts – each time he passed. In the summer of 2011, the Republicans refused to raise the nation’s debt-ceiling unless the Democrats agreed to major spending cuts, forcing Obama to accept a deal that Paul Krugman denounced as “an abject surrender on the part of the president.” The fiscal cliff bargain Obama struck at the end of 2012 secured $600 billion in much needed revenue but it also set in motion a doomsday machine of budget sequestration designed to force massive federal program reductions. Should the President have refused to yield to blackmail and stood by the principle that Congress must pay for expenditures it had already approved? Perhaps, but following this route would have courted a worldwide financial meltdown and triggered spending cuts even sooner than envisioned under the sequestration. Since the outcome could not be determined a priori in such circumstances, pragmatists should not hesitate to acknowledge this much as they ponder available options and weigh risks and opportunities.

The Keystone XL oil pipeline is a model case for another pragmatist principle: worthy values often work at cross-purpose and leave little room for compromise. Arguments against transporting oil from the tar-laden sands of Alberta are well rehearsed – the 878-mile pipeline will damage the environment, increase our dependence on a carbon-heavy energy source, and exacerbate global warming.
But the Keystone project promises to create jobs, lessen our dependence on Middle East oil, and help a friendly neighbor Canada. Will Obama place environmental protection and global warming concerns above other considerations? I hope so, but whatever the final disposition, he must acknowledge the values sacrificed for a larger good.

The president’s evolving stance on gay rights offers further insight into his pragmatic sensibilities. In 2004, he declared that “marriage is something sanctified between a man and a woman.” Two years later, he endorsed a more flexible view that “decisions about marriage should be left to the states.” In 2007, he proclaimed, “America is ready to get rid of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy. All that is required is leadership.” It took him three more years to show leadership on this front and repeal the discriminatory policy. In a postelection interview, Obama explained his delaying tactics: “There were advocates in the LGBT community who were furious at me, saying, ‘Why don’t you just sign with a pen ordering the Pentagon to do this?’ And my argument was that we could build a coalition to get this done.” Whatever political and institutional constraints Obama faced at the time – and those are not to be taken lightly, his tactic raised legitimate doubts as to whether he was dodging hard decisions.

Obama’s pragmatism raised further questions in the foreign policy arena. In 2009, the President visited the Republic of Kyrgyzstan where he hobnobbed with Kurmanbek Bakiev just as this country’s authoritarian ruler was cracking down on critics. The President was mum on human rights abuses in Bahrain where the U.S. keeps its Navy’s Fifth Fleet, in China to which America owes a crushing debt, and in Russia whose cooperation on foreign policy the U.S. assiduously courts. To protect the strategic partnership, the Obama administration worked behind the scene to scuttle the Magnitsky Act barring Russian officials implicated in the gruesome death of Sergei Magnitsky from entering this country (the President signed the bill after Congress passed it with a veto-proof majority vote). Well-intentioned as it might seem, Obama’s realpolitik is a disappointment to courageous activists fighting for human rights abroad. Ironically, some of the strongmen whose abuses Obama
chose to overlook had been touted as “pragmatists” – a useful reminder that “liberal pragmatism” has its “illiberal” counterpart.

Obama’s approach faced the toughest test in the area of civil liberties. The President left detainees at the Guantanamo prison languish without judicial review and allowed the extrajudicial killing of terrorist suspects that claimed innocent lives. The Obama administration cited national security reasons to justify its policies, but its actions contradict the due process guarantees in the U.S. Constitution and the provisions of the Universal Human Rights Declaration, which the U.S. proudly helped to launch in 1948. “It’s possible to compromise so long as you know those principles that can never be compromised,” Obama told his supporters. And what are those higher principles that justify targeted killing without court sanction, indefinite detention for prisoners never charged with a crime, denying torture victims access to courts, persecuting investigative journalists?

In the counterterrorism speech delivered on May 23, the President offered an extended rationale for his policies and hinted at changes to come. This was vintage Obama, thoughtfully laying out competing rationales and promising to balance opposing values. He proposed to move the targeted killing program from the C.I.A. to the Pentagon on the theory that the latter will exercise more caution in selecting its targets, with as yet unknown review board overseeing future drone attacks. He will renew efforts to close Guantanamo prison, shield journalists from government overreach, and consult Congress on limiting presidential war powers.

It all sounds reasonable, except for the fact that we’ve heard much of this before. Wasn’t closing the Guantanamo prison Obama’s top priority in 2007? Didn’t he vow to push for the Free Flow of Information Act? Hadn’t he criticized the Bush administration for condoning the intrusive domestic surveillance? And whose approval does he need to stop force-feeding GTMO prisoners?

Rhetoric is a double-edged sword, it is sure to backfire when we lack the courage of conviction to body forth our discourse. Obama’s speechifying will be seen as an excuse for inaction as long as he keeps waiting for Congress to put on his desk the statutes he likes. He needs to lead the charge, get into the trenches to
mobilize his supporters, and make executive decisions certain to rile his opponents. The spirit of Seneca Falls, Selma, and Stonewall demands nothing less.

“Pragmatism is about process, not principle,” Frank Rich once noted. I beg to differ. Pragmatism cannot sidestep the question of values, and when it tries to, it morphs into expedience and self-serving triangulation, a favorite tactic of politicians determined to stay afloat at any cost.

Principled pragmatism differs from its opportunistic counterpart by staying true to progressive values, risking a confrontation when suasion fails, showing which value takes precedence when a compromise is impossible, and acknowledging the defeat rather than looking for someone to blame when the results fall short of our commitments. This is the progressivism Jane Addams and John Dewey have bequeathed us.

Obama’s second term will determine what kind of progressive politician and liberal pragmatist he is.