

# Is Newt Gingrich a Closet New Leftist?

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Newt Gingrich is leading the most successful attack on the capitalist state since the 1960s. Tearing apart bureaucracies, desanctifying authority, de-legitimizing the corporate liberal political system, decentralizing power closer down to the grass roots—these are all the battle slogans of the first 100 days of power for the new Speaker of the House and his new Republican majority.

Are we missing something here? Is Gingrich a hidden 1960s new leftist in 1990s conservative clothing? Not only is he using some of our old slogans, he also appears to be invading our political space. After all, it was only after the antiwar and civil rights movements of 30 years ago that it became possible to badmouth the White House and the federal government the way it's being done today.

Some might object that Gingrich and the new left would have parted company on the question of capitalism. That's true for some. But for most of the antiwar left, it was "Hey, Hey, LBJ, How Many Kids Did You Kill Today," and not "Hey, Hey Corporate Capitalism . . ." Moreover, the Vietnam war spread the mistrust of government far beyond the left. Follow that with Watergate, CIA intrigues in Central America, the S&L Bailout . . . and you get the picture.

The left has been anti-government in its sympathies at least since Karl Marx, who saw the state as rooted in the defense of private property and an oppressive tool of the capitalists generally. Getting rid of the state was part of the final aim of communism. Lenin's writings on the topic also call for totally deconstructing the capitalist state and starting afresh with a workers' state, which was also viewed as a necessary evil during the transition to a classless society. The anti-Stalinist left also developed a theory of statism, which blamed the failure of socialism in part on the control and manipulation of the government bureaucracy by a new statist political class.

Now Newt has joined our ranks--except he's blaming the stagnation and failures of capitalism on the rise of a statist political class in Washington, D.C. The media is awash with Gingrich's polemics. No wonder it's tough being a Marxist radical in America: Newt gets more TV time in a week than we get in 30 years!

There's a serious point here. We need to avoid knee-jerk reactions to the new victories of the right. We especially need to avoid those reactions that would have us oppose the right by simply defending liberals and the government. Politics starts by taking the current consciousness of the people seriously. The American people today know something is terribly wrong with government and the corporate liberalism guiding a good deal of it. Politics as usual is causing them nothing but grief; it deepens their anger and alienation and sets the conditions for radical change. The danger, of course, is that radical change can take reactionary directions as well as progressive directions.

Assessments of class-consciousness stemming from this frustration are in vogue among many journalists and pundits these days. A recent piece in the New York Times by Louis Uchitelle offered a better one than most. As he sees it, both working-class and middle-class people share an awareness of insecurity and anxiety. But he adds that they lack "two crucial elements of class consciousness as the term has historically been used: a class vocabulary and a class enemy."

## Misplaced Anger

Anger of this sort is not directed at business, but at government, immigrants and people of color, and the poor. When people lose their jobs or see their income shrink, they don't march on the banks or seize a GM plant; instead they vote out their incumbent representatives in Congress. Their anger, stoked by the likes of Rush Limbaugh, directly fueled the GOP victory at the polls.

The problem is that the Republicans have had nothing to resolve the people's anger, either. Here's where Newt steps up and offers a new way of looking at the world. He's not a traditional conservative, he says, but a futurist conservative. Some might say that's a contradiction in terms. But we know exactly where Newt is coming from: he's an independent thinker who's been influenced by Alvin and Heidi Toffler, the prime futurists of our day. He's personally acquainted with the Tofflers, authors of *The Third Wave*, *Powershift* and many other seminal works on the social impact of the information revolution. He's not alone; a good number of political thinkers, leaders and activists from across the entire political spectrum have based their perspectives on the work of the Tofflers and others on the overwhelming importance of the current revolution in society's productive forces. The Toffler's description of that event as the transition from a second-wave industrial society to a third wave information one is best analyses out there. A rereading of *The Third Wave*, written 15 years ago, reveals a remarkably astute book full of fresh insights that sounds like it was written yesterday.

Newt and his core followers are campaigning hard to stake out the right wing perspective within an emerging third wave society. They understand that a Republican party that gets stuck merely defending a stagnant and declining second wave business elite has no future. There are liberal Democrats with similar views--Vice President Al Gore, Labor Secretary Robert Reich, Former California Governor Jerry Brown, to name a few. From the libertarian right, George Gilder has become a noted devotee and theoretician of cyberspace. As for the third wave's left wing, we like to include ourselves and the other editors of *Cy.Rev*, along with many other groups such as the IGC Networks, the Electronic Frontier Foundation and Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility.

Gingrich doesn't always speak as a Third Waver. But where and when he does, the left would do well to seriously reexamine its approach to many issues. Take the issue of downsizing government. It's an inevitable and progressive outcome of the third wave: networked computers as opposed to mainframes have an inherent tendency to flatten organizational hierarchies and eliminate much of middle management. Rather than resisting downsizing, we should support it but in a way that affirms egalitarian values, popular democracy and the interests of the unemployed.

But there's a lot of hypocrisy in the right wing's approach to government cutbacks. The biggest second wave bureaucracy around, for instance, is the Department of Defense, the CIA and their far-flung military and counterinsurgency budgets. These two have wasted more treasure, destroyed more lives, stagnated more industries, inflated more currency and deepened more deficits by far than any other component of government. For example, about 50% of the federal budget is spent on military security, while about 1% goes to welfare mothers to feed and house their children.

## Socialism for the Rich

Yet Newt makes cutting off welfare his top priority at the same time as he calls for wasting more money on Star Wars. This is the sham anti-government stance of the right wing, whether they're of the third wave or second wave variety. When the chips are down, they want the free market for the workers, the poor and their competitors; for themselves and their little clusters of special interests, they want protectionism, bailouts and subsidized privileges. One of Labor Secretary Reich's better moments was his recent attack on the "corporate welfare" of the rich that was being ignored in the current climate of polemics against the poor.

Of course welfare reform is needed. But let's remember that welfare "as we know it" is the product of corporate liberalism's efforts to dampen class struggle and buy social stability; it's never been a prototype of socialism or even a decent method for redistributing income. We also need to address the issues of crime and gangs, which Newt and the right have been using to gain a foothold among the working class with hardly any challenge from the left. For example, we need to show that the GOP plan for prison expansion only deepens the problem of crime. It would sweep millions of young men from the streets, brutalize them for several years, deny them schooling and job training except for the advanced crime skills they would learn from more hardened criminals, and finally dump them back on the street with no support but the "free market." The GOP expects this program to stop crime, rather than create more crime. If it wasn't such a tragedy, it would be a joke.

Expanding prisons as a key program doesn't do much for Gingrich's reputation as either a third waver or a libertarian. So when an issue gets hot, he retreats into decentralism--"let's leave it up to the states" --to avoid controversy. There is nothing wrong with returning many government programs to the state or municipal level. Local politics is more accessible to grass roots' movements. A good amount of decentralization, moreover, is an inevitable consequence of telecommunications and its impact on the economic base of society. Gridlock in Washington is partly a result of federal bureaucracies being too distant and too clumsy to handle regional and urban realities.

With Gingrich in charge, the next few years of GOP politics will be anything but dull. In addition to the tension between second and third wave thinking, the party is already divided three ways between the traditional pragmatic business owners, the quasi-fascist theocrats of the Christian right, and the libertarian entrepreneurs. Each of them believes, with some justification, that a piece of Newt's personality belongs to them. What happens as the issues sharpen and the upheavals arrive will present immense challenges for all of us.