

The American ‘left’ and Edward Snowden

By Eric London
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In the nearly three months since Edward Snowden began releasing information detailing US government surveillance programs, the young whistle-blower’s actions have become the focus of political attention and concern all over the world.

Snowden’s revelations have revealed the emergence of a police-state apparatus of enormous scope. Billions of phone calls, Skype calls, emails, text messages, credit card purchases, Internet traffic histories and social media communications are being recorded, stored and accessed by intelligence bureaucrats. These operations are carried out in blatant violation of the US Constitution.

The exposure of these criminal actions has thrown the Obama administration and the American ruling class into political crisis. Despite non-stop attacks on Snowden from the political establishment, Snowden remains widely popular. A recent Quinnipiac poll found that 55 percent of Americans see Snowden as a whistle-blower, versus only 34 percent who view him as a traitor.

These figures reflect the rejection by broad layers of the population of the claim that the assault on privacy rights is being carried out to protect the people from terrorism. In reality, the surveillance programs have been set up and expanded to prepare to meet growing social opposition to war, austerity and social inequality with state repression. Already, the Obama administration is treating the exposure of government secrets and crimes as espionage and treason, as seen in the frame-up and conviction of Private Bradley Manning and the legal witch-hunt against Snowden and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Increasingly, journalists and publications that publish such exposures are coming under state attack, as seen in the US-UK attacks on the *Guardian* newspaper and the detention and interrogation of David Miranda, the partner of journalist Glenn Greenwald.

In their response to the Snowden revelations, the various representatives of the milieu of “left” liberals and pseudo-left organizations have displayed a staggering level of indifference, complacency, and outright hostility to Snowden.

A typical example was given on MSNBC last month by Melissa Harris-Perry, a Tulane University professor of political science, contributor to the *Nation* magazine and a supposedly “left” supporter of the Democratic Party and the Obama administration.

Under conditions in which Snowden was fighting for his freedom and his very life, holed up in a Moscow airport while seeking asylum as a political refugee after having been indicted for espionage by the US, Harris-Perry launched into an attack on Snowden. She denounced him for refusing to return to the US to

face prosecution—after he had been declared guilty by Obama and denounced as a traitor by politicians of both parties—and accused him of egomania.

Echoing Obama, Harris-Perry accepted the legitimacy of the claim that the systematic violations of the Constitution were motivated by concern for the security of the American people, and called for a “debate” on the need to “balance” democratic rights with national security. Snowden, she declared, was impeding such a “debate” by focusing attention on his own plight—as though he was to blame for the international dragnet against him carried out by the Obama administration.

“Here’s the deal,” she said. “It’s time to come home and face the consequences of the actions for which you are so proud.” Continuing to lecture Snowden, she declared, “by engaging in this Tom Hanks-worthy, border-jumping drama through some of the world’s most totalitarian states, you are making yourself the story... I mean, where do you even come up with that kind of garbage, Ed? What are you thinking?”

This lavishly-paid academic/media flak for Obama and the American ruling class went on to assure Snowden that he “might not have anything to worry about” if he submitted himself to the mercy of the US courts, because “the Obama Administration will be very careful about how it treats you.”

As though no one had ever heard of drone assassinations, indefinite detention, torture, the legal lynching of Bradley Manning, Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay!

All of this, of course, adds up to a defense of Obama and the assault on democratic rights. Harris-Perry has made a lucrative career promoting identity politics. She has written a book entitled *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, and is currently the director of The Anna Julia Cooper Project on Gender, Race, and Politics in the South. Her diatribe against Snowden demonstrates that the obsessive focus by her ilk on issues of race, gender and sexual orientation and denial of class as the decisive social category masks a complete lack of democratic consciousness and a callous indifference to the democratic rights of working people.

Harris-Perry speaks for a very affluent layer of the middle class for whom the promotion of identity and life-style policies is a means of self-enrichment and integration into the Democratic Party establishment.

Support for the Democratic Party amongst affluent “left” figures is perhaps exemplified most clearly by Rick Perlstein, reporter for the *Nation*. He wrote an article in June defending himself against criticism from Glenn Greenwald. “Now, am I ‘Democratic partisan?’” Perlstein asked. “Maybe a little bit, sometimes. In the

final analysis, yes, Rick Perlstein prefers a strong Democratic Party to a weak one.”

He noted that “given the rules of the American political game, people who try to participate by self-righteously refusing to identify with one or the other of the two parties are like people who say they love to play baseball but refuse to join a team.”

Greenwald had criticized Pearlstein for uncritically accusing him of exaggerating the anti-democratic character of the NSA spying programs.

A similar hostility to democratic rights can be found in the remarkably sparse and perfunctory coverage of the Snowden revelations by the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO), which praised Melissa Harris-Perry for her racialist politics as recently as last month in an article on the Trayvon Martin murder trial.

Although the ISO—as opposed to Harris-Perry—labels itself “socialist”, it promotes the same brand of identity politics. Its right-wing character is exemplified by the simple fact that it has not once raised a call for the defense of Edward Snowden!

The ISO’s coverage of Snowden is most notable for how little there is. The ISO did not publish a single article on Snowden between July 25 and August 13 on its web site Socialistworker.org. Prior to that, it refrained from publishing on Snowden from June 19 to July 16—a period during which the site posted seven articles on abortion and four on gay marriage.

The failure to produce more than a handful of articles in nearly three months is neither a mistake nor an accident.

The ISO says as little as possible about Edward Snowden because the ISO cannot speak of Snowden without indicting Barack Obama and the entire Democratic Party establishment, to which the organization is bound hand and foot. Like Melissa Harris-Perry, the ISO’s concern for democratic rights stops the second the issue threatens to draw the group into conflict with the Democratic Party.

The ISO’s indifference to the Snowden revelations is all the more notable given its relationship with Glenn Greenwald, who speaks regularly at ISO conferences. Greenwald’s appearance at the conference this year was notable largely by the thoroughly complacent and unserious attitude promoted by the ISO throughout, culminating in the exhortation from ISO leader Sherry Wolf that, following the remarks, “everyone should get a drink.”

When Socialistworker . com does write on Snowden, it invariably puts forward the false and reactionary perspective of pressuring the Democratic Party.

In a June 12 article entitled “Who’s watching Big Brother?” the editorial board concludes by calling for a Senate committee to investigate the national security apparatus, based on the precedent of the committee headed by Idaho Senator Frank Church in the mid-1970s.

Writing that “under pressure from widespread discontent and activism, the Senate established a committee, chaired by Idaho Sen. Frank Church, to investigate the federal government’s intelligence-gathering activities,” the ISO declares that “today, it will be the same kind of vocal and active opposition, not silence, that will make our world a safer, more democratic place...”

The ISO put forward the same proposal in a re-post from

Aljazeera.com published on July 25.

The call for “vocal and active opposition” to pressure the Obama administration and political establishment for more oversight of the national security apparatus is aimed at channeling popular anger and concern over the assault on democratic rights behind the Democratic Party. It deliberately obscures the roots of the decay of democracy in the crisis and decay of American capitalism and the massive growth of social inequality.

It thereby conceals the basic class issues involved in the buildup of a police state apparatus and opposes a genuine socialist perspective, which insists that the defense of democratic rights depends on the development of a mass movement of the working class fighting for socialism.

The ISO’s ignorant talk of another Church committee ignores the vast movement of the entire American political establishment to the right over the last forty years. As though nothing of significance has happened in the meantime—such as the Iran-Contra affair, the theft of the 2000 election, the “war on terror,” the Patriot Act, Homeland Security, Northern Command, launching of wars based on lies, drone assassinations, Guantanamo, etc.

It also ignores the bipartisan character of the massive assault on democratic rights that has been carried out, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001.

Moreover, the Church committee is significant today above all as a demonstration of the failure of the perspective of pressure on the political establishment and reform of the system. Indeed, one its major “reforms,” the secret Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, has become a key instrument for the gutting of the Bill of Rights.

Workers and youth must draw lessons from the right-wing character of the so-called “left,” which has no more commitment to democratic rights than the ruling class itself. As the responses of Melissa Harris-Perry, the *Nation* and the ISO to the Snowden revelations make clear, these forces have been thoroughly integrated into bourgeois politics. Only the American and international working class, fighting on the basis of a socialist perspective, is capable of mounting a defense of Edward Snowden and democratic rights.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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