

Letter to Barack #2

A Letter to Barack from the SouthOK Barack, I sent out a thousand copies of my first letter to you. Several friends responded by correcting my number: You got nearly 65 million votes, not 52 million. Nobody questioned my concept. The concept is that together we are going to transform civil society. In the campaign your opponent sang the rancid old Republican theme song: Get the government off our backs. He repeated the perennial liberal utopian ideology: He assumed there is nothing wrong with civil society. He said too much government is the problem, less government is the solution. You put together phrases from Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, & stirring old roots with Spring rain. You emphasized some relatively new dimensions: bottom up, service, transform, higher purpose, save the world. Some people say you won our votes by appealing to our emotions, and then less than 24 hours after the polls closed confirmed that although your words expressed crowd-pleasing sentiments they referred to nothing concrete when you by appointed a no-nonsense conservative Democrat as your chief of staff. I say behind the emotion there is a concept: transform civil society. People are as delirious about your victory in Asia and Africa as they are in Chicago and Los Angeles because you touched their hearts with a dream of CHANGE. Although you are legally the President-elect of the USA, and only in some people's imagination the President-elect of the world, you are for billions the incarnation of HOPE. The world's billions may harbour enthusiasm without clarity, but what they feel in their hearts can be clarified. It can be put into practice. There was a promise in your campaign that John McCain did not understand. You are not the tax and spend Democrat he was attacking. Amitai Etzioni is right to call you a communitarian. blog.amitaietzioni.org/2008/01/a-communitarian.html CHANGE and HOPE have an operational meaning above and beyond Rooseveltian social democracy: above and beyond stronger government; above and beyond defending the economic interests of the middle and working classes; above and beyond reversing the dismantling of the welfare state. They mean a groundswell of social responsibility in the private sector; they mean a culture shift. Without the second the first is not feasible. Without the transformation of civil society CHANGE and HOPE will deflate to gasless plastic balloons. I appreciate the difficulty of keeping track of your 64 million electors and your 3 million contributors, even though you have promised to listen carefully to what we have to say. I imagine myself as number 32,641,211 among the electors and number 1,025,986 among the contributors. If you look up number 1,025,986 on your database you will find a California address, but actually I am an expat. I live on the Continent of Hope (South America), and vote by absentee ballot. I do not usually vote for Democrats. I made an exception in your case because I thought that because of your background as a community organizer you would know in practical terms what it would take to give concrete meaning to your words. I thought that someone who had imbibed anthropology with his mother's milk, and who had lived as a child in Indonesia, would be capable of rising above the ethnocentrism of his father's profession. I thought that you could facilitate turning the culture shift the masses vaguely dream and desire into an operational reality. I thought the other world that is happening at thousands of sites around the planet would find in Barack Obama a leader who symbolized it and understood it because of his personal history. Today I went to a meeting. You know about meetings. "Participation" sounds good but meetings are .. well ... er … ah… indispensable. If you cannot endure the boredom and/or petty quarrels that typify the average meeting you cannot change the world. You are like a soldier who flunked boot camp, yes? Today's meeting was better than average. It was at the office of our communal union of neighbourhood councils. Our little town of 40,000 people is divided into 52 neighborhoods, each with its council. On the pretext of preparing for the impact of the world financial crisis, and taking advantage of the opportunities created by our recent success in electing a new mayor with new ideas (who happens to be a gay man who won handily in spite of homophobic propaganda against him) we are doing what we should be doing even without the crisis and even without the new mayor. Every neighbourhood will have a community food pantry run by volunteers, through which anybody who is unemployed can earn food by community service. We are not giving anything away. Those who do not succeed in selling their labor in the labor market work for the local community and the local community pools resources to make sure they get by. We have already organized food security in one neighbourhood, and now we are extending the practice to other neighbourhoods. Next time you are in Argentina you might consider visiting Cordoba or any of several other cities to see ABC (Abastecimiento Basico Comunitario). It is a project of the National Institute of Industrial Technology headed by my friend Enrique Martinez. Enrique's proposal is that every Argentine have assured at the neighbourhood level adequate nutrition, primary health care (at the neighbourhood clinic), and housing. Then let the storms brew as they may at the level of the national economy and the global economy. (See www.inti.gov.ar) More later. I aim to contribute to the transformation of civil society in the North by making better known some of the seeds of transformation that are already germinating in the South. Howard R. 8 November 2008 p.s. Scholars will notice that my use of the term "civil society" blends its classic sense (that of Hegel's *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) with its more recent senses popularized by the World Bank and others.