



Stay Classy, Mike Huckabee

By David Sirota
Creators Syndicate, 1/11/08

"The uncool subject is class," author Bell Hooks once wrote. "It's the subject that makes us all tense." What an understatement, considering the two leading "change" candidates in the latest presidential polls.

Barack Obama is contending for the Democratic nomination as a candidate who avoids focusing on economic class. He asks us to believe — nay, to "hope" — that the interests of Wall Streeters underwriting his campaign can somehow be "brought together" with the interests of workers harmed by corporate America's wage, job and pension cutbacks.

By contrast, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee is competing for the Republican nomination on a call for proletarian solidarity. Next to John Edwards (D), he is the "classiest" presidential candidate, explicitly deriding "plutocracy" and "the Club for Greed" that he correctly says runs Washington.

"There's a great need in this country to elect someone who reminds [voters] of the guy they work with, not the guy who laid them off," Huckabee thunders.

This is taboo territory. Though the Wall Street Journal reports that America has among the lowest class mobility in the industrialized world, the Establishment stifles discussion about class. Why? Because those controlling the debate — from television anchors to political donors to campaign consultants — are among the wealthiest members of what Huckabee calls "the ruling class." They have an obvious self-interest in pretending class does not exist.

Not surprisingly, officialdom has reacted quite differently to the Obama and Huckabee phenomena.

The ruling class roundly praises Obama's class-averse campaign. Even George Will, the columnist-spokesman for country club Republicanism, effused that Obama is

"refreshingly cerebral."

Will lambastes Huckabee as "an adolescent" for daring to "lament a shrinking middle class." Such vitriol is commonplace, from the National Review calling the Republican candidate "deeply naive" to Time's Joe Klein praying for a "monumental implosion" of Huckabee's campaign.

To those with money and power, Huckabee is committing the worst sin. His class rhetoric puts his Christian religion's altruistic, meek-shall-inherit-the-Earth tenets above Washington's free market fundamentalism. And the cultural roots accompanying Huckabee's cause are even more appalling to the limousine crowd. This Republican apostate is not an Ivy Leaguer putting on a wink-and-nod show. He's a former Baptist minister from a low-income family who was never scrubbed by an elite brush — meaning he might actually believe in his class crusade.

This explains not just the difference in treatment of the Harvard-educated Obama and the Ouachita Baptist University-educated Huckabee, but an even more revealing hypocrisy involving President Bush.

Recall that the media portrays Bush's alliance with the religious right as proof of his convictions. Huckabee's alliance with the same religious right is subtly cast as a sign of supposed ignorance. Bush's rhetorical gaffes are often painted as endearing — evidence that despite his silver-spoon pedigree, he is the authentic "average American man" thinking "in a common-sense way," as Republican commentator Peggy Noonan wrote. Huckabee? The Weekly Standard calls him "a village idiot" and a "rube," while Noonan derides him for "populist manipulation."

Bush, you see, was always an aristocrat underneath the "windshield cowboy" veneer. He is the son of a president, a Skull-and-Bones man — ruling class all the way.

Huckabee, on the other hand, is a real-life regular guy. He views religion as more than just a convenient political cudgel, truly did pull himself "up from the bootstraps" — and his class grievances are personal. The well-heeled narcissists in the media and political Establishment are appalled. They see Huckabee as a country bumpkin getting uppity.

As UCLA professor Mark Kleiman wrote, "If you went to Harvard, it's plain embarrassing to say you're going to vote for someone as, well, unwashed, as Huckabee."

Certainly, Obama's underlying policy platform is good for working-class America — and better than Huckabee's, which is led by a punishingly regressive tax proposal.

However, the campaigns' rhetorical themes are critical to consider because they impact what will — and will not — be acceptable topics of political debate in the

post-Bush era.

Personally, I want to believe Obama's vision of America as a class-free utopia where change comes without rancor or division. But history shows that most positive change in America has been about class and conflict — whether it was the battle for basic labor laws or the fight for Social Security.

That's why, whoever wins the primaries, the more class forces its way onto the presidential stage, the better.

In short, stay classy, Mike Huckabee.

David Sirota is the bestselling author of "Hostile Takeover" (Crown, 2006). He is a senior fellow at the Campaign for America's Future and a board member of the Progressive States Network — both nonpartisan research organizations. His daily blog can be found at www.credoaction.com/sirota. To find out more about David Sirota and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

COPYRIGHT 2008 CREATORS SYNDICATE, INC.