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Stanley Aronowitz

American Politics on the Edge

Abstracts

Currently there are two major strategies attempting to thwart the rightward lurch of United States politics: liberals and leftists who place faith in their ability to push the Democratic party away from its current center-right orientation; and the new social movements which, disdaining electoral politics and party organization have elevated the concept of "protest and resistance" to the level of a principle and social strategy. This article argues that we desperately need a discussion about the possibility and justification for the formation of a new radical party which combines the best of the electoral and extra electoral experiences of progressive movements.

La politica americana en la encrucijada

Actualmente hay dos principales estrategias, liberales e izquierdistas que tratan de empujar al partido demócrata fuera de su giro a la derecha, y los nuevos movimientos sociales, desdeñando la política electoral y la organización partidaria elevan el concepto de protesta y resistencia al nivel de principio y estrategia social. Este artículo plantea la necesidad de una discusión sobre la posibilidad y justificación de formar un nuevo partido radical que combine lo mejor de la experiencia electoral y extraelectoral y de los movimientos sociales.

American Politics on the Edge

In the United States today there are two main strategies for thwarting and finally reversing the terrible rightward lurch of official politics. The most visible is the alliance of liberals and a considerable portion of the established left to push the Democratic party to become a genuine political opposition. This strategy has been in force since the 1950s when the anti-nuclear movement succeeded in pushing the two-time Democratic presidential nominee, Adlai Stevenson, to oppose further testing of nuclear weapons. Stevenson lost in 1956 as he had four years earlier but the movement he helped inspire among liberals continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s and, for a brief period, became a major force within a war-torn Democratic Party.

The liberal wing of the DP has never swerved from its faith in the two-party system as an adequate expression of democracy and especially the idea that, for all their warts, the Democrats remain the last best hope for progressive change. "Political Realignment", the name given this strategy by writer Michael Harrington in the 1970s proved no more successful than other versions. Harrington depended on an alliance of organized labor and civil rights organizations to carry the flag of reform. Needless to say, as we saw, most of the labor movement lined up behind the Center-Right within the party and the civil rights organizations stepped back after their stunning legislative victories in the enactment of civil rights laws in 1964 and 1965. Undeterred by repeated failure, left-liberals have doggedly embraced defeat throughout the Reagan and Bush eras.

Less visible but vigorous and growing is the large contingent of mostly young people who have joined street protests, formed solidarity committees for radical and revolutionary movements, mostly in Latin America, attached themselves to the World Social Forum and to anti-sweatshop and killer coke movements, and organized support for domestic labor struggles among the working poor. As opposed to the old "new social movements" these groups are largely non-institutions, often based on affinity groups which dissolve as quickly as they are formed and seared with the self-description of anarchism, although they have little to do with the traditional anarchist movements. From my own experience and observations, "anarchism" today signifies a resolute rejection of the established parties, electoralism, and stable political organization. As admirable and sometimes inspiring as the new, new social movements are, their contingent style – the secret of their tactical success – and lack of theoretical and political perspective precludes the possibility that

they will emerge as a full-fledged opposition or contender for power. In fact, many who adhere to this tendency are not interested in taking power except, perhaps, over their own lives.

These Are Dangerous Times

There are few times in history when one can confidently declare that we stand at a dangerous crossroad. This is one of those times. We are in danger of abrogating many features of our imperfect liberal democracy and sinking into an authoritarianism that, what George W. Bush terms “the unitary executive”, ignores Congress and the law in its quest for arbitrary power. The ancient left slogan, composed by Rosa Luxemburg during World War One and reiterated by many in the era of fascist insurgency, is that we are faced with the alternative of *socialism or barbarism* has never been more pressing. Bush’s flagrant executive-driven unconstitutional practice of spying on American citizens occurs without a warrant, fear of impeachment or even severe censure by Congress. With the president’s approbation, the United States military maintains torture camps in Guantanamo, Cuba and in, among other places, authoritarian Romania; these are only the latest indications that we have entered a dangerous place in our political life. Moreover the left and liberal organizations have been unable to thwart the Bush agenda to pack the Supreme Court and Federal District Courts with right-wing ideologues. Fatefully they depended, to no avail except perhaps to make a record for the midterm elections in 2006, on constituents’ pressure on members of the Senate, and a week of Senate Hearings on each of Bush’s two radical right nominees to expose the ideological hue of John Roberts and Samuel Alito. These entreaties failed to prompt the Democrats to organize effectively to filibuster the nominations. All but a handful of opponents, mostly professionals linked to the liberal establishment, remain otherwise demobilized as the public was reduced, by and large, to spectators to the deliberations that were pre-designed to approve the candidates. When on January 15, 2006 centrist Senators like California’s Diane Feinstein declared a filibuster was inappropriate to derail Alito’s nomination it became clear that, whatever the inclination of the liberals (Feinstein finally reversed herself), they would not have the votes to defeat a cloture motion.

The apparent explanation for the Democrats’ callow refusal to threaten the filibuster early enough to muster the necessary 41 votes to defeat cloture was

Tom Daschle's defeat in the 2004 senatorial race, a loss that was said to be attributable to his "obstructionist" tactics. What the Democratic establishment seems to have forgotten is that they are a minority and the putative opposition. If an opposition does not use every measure at its command to stand up for principle, it may be convicted of complicity with the right's agenda.

We might add the Bush administration's brazen refusal to seriously address global warming. Bush's refusal to sign the relatively mild Kyoto treaty because it might constitute a threat to economic growth is perhaps its most egregious violation of the survival of the planet's life forms. His posture has given new (and literal) meaning to the phrase "apres nous la deluge" (after us the flood). The administration's openly anti-working and middle class fiscal and social policies constitute a direct assault on the poor – an expanding fraction of the United States population –, and on the once stable sections of the working and professional managerial classes who daily can feel the ground shifting under their feet. The tepid response of Democrats, the trade union, feminist, civil rights, and environmental organizations – America's putative opposition – only compounds the felonies. While during the reauthorization of the notorious Patriot Act in late 2005 some opponents gathered around the ACLU and organizations like Move On sounded the alarm and actually thwarted the right, temporarily, the level of fury and mobilization remains fairly weak. Most seem to be waiting on Congress, the Democrats, or a fairy godmother to rectify the mounting accumulation of wrongs.

The left-liberals no less than the moderates who control the Democratic Party assume the lingering viability of the traditional strategy of putting pressure on the government and on representative institutions like the legislatures to change social, foreign and civil liberties policies. And during the 2004 presidential election they faithfully followed the idea-less Democrats on the road to almost certain defeat on the premise that its candidate, John Kerry was not worse than Bush (in the ironic words of one commentator "not a lunatic").¹ They remained virtually silent as the Supreme Court awarded the 2000 election to George W. Bush by stopping the recount ordered by a lower court in Florida's heavily populated counties, even in the wake of overwhelming evidence that his minions had stolen the Florida vote, the crucial state that, despite his loss of the popular vote, awarded Bush an

¹ Willis 2004.

Electoral College victory. In fact Florida law disenfranchises more than 800,000 otherwise eligible voters, most of them black. Against all evidence to the contrary, not the least of which is perhaps the most ideologically-loaded Congress and right wing administration since Calvin Coolidge, the liberals have continued to place blind faith in the electoral process to reverse the current state of affairs.

While leaders of many of these organizations are acutely aware of Democratic complicity, even collusion in the pursuit of the Bush agenda – indeed reports reveal that some congressional Democrats, including Minority leader Nancy Pelosi were informed by the Bush administration of its surveillance program but remained silent, perhaps because they were grateful to be “consulted” – voted to authorize the administration’s proposal to invade Iraq, and in 2001 all Senate Democrats save Russell Feingold of Wisconsin voted for the Patriot Act. Liberals still place hope that the Democrats will somehow see the light.

The liberals mobilize their constituents to write solemn letters to indifferent public officials, sign petitions, and even call their representatives, and these gestures pass for self-activity. Claiming the streets or organizing a genuine opposition political formation seems as far from their plans as going to Mars except, perhaps, to oppose the Iraq war. And even then opposition took the form of the simple demand for withdrawal of United States troops. The various wings of the anti-war movement have carefully avoided trying to offer an analysis for the intervention in the first place, or taken the trouble to draw the consequences for Iraq of US withdrawal lest these split their ranks. War opponents have been willing to engage in mass demonstrations but not the complex work of providing to the public the tools of understanding. The anti-war forces do not believe in persuasion, otherwise they would have emulated one of the most successful tactics of the anti-Vietnam war movement: teach-ins on college campuses, town meetings, studies and white papers detailing the legal basis as well as the political basis of the opposition.

And the left-liberal media, notably the magazines of opinion, staunchly refuse to examine the structure of the highest concentration of economic and political power in United States history and the opposition’s ideological integration, arguably the most important intellectual/political task of our own time. Specifically they have sealed their eyes to the fact that elements of the top leadership of the Democratic Party are part of that concentrated power and have thwarted efforts to make the Democrats into an opposition party. Instead we are treated to a seemingly endless diet of Bush-bashing as

if the Reagan revolution did not set the stage for both Democratic and Republican fiscal and social policies, and the bi-partisan foreign policy, forged in the aftermath of World War Two does not still exist.

Nor are the left-liberal media willing to address in any serious way the bi-partisan neo-liberal consensus around trade whose chief advocate was the Democratic president, Bill Clinton. In this connection there is virtually no difference between the parties on the important question of supporting the activities of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund the World Trade Organization and other agencies that are charged with managing the developing world on behalf of the neo-liberal agenda of the leading powers. Nor is there a substantial debate in the legislative arena on whether capital should be able to move across borders at will. Capital's freedom to move anywhere it pleases has had dire consequences for United States, European and Latin American living standards. That more than three decades of deindustrialization of the once awesome United States industrial machine that followed Richard Nixon's abrogation of the Bretton Woods Agreement in the early 1970s which had placed the dollar at the relatively stable center of world currencies, barely detains the liberals and has occupied the attention of only a small contingent of the labor left.

Massive deindustrialization all but decimated the once mighty industrial unions, reduced many of America's large and middle-sized cities to poverty, directly drove down living standards for millions of Americans who are forced to seek employment in the retail sector that typically pays wages below the poverty line, and placed the economies of the more developed of Latin American countries in jeopardy. For example, what are we to make of the discrepancy between the much heralded low unemployment rate of under 5% in early 2006 with the fact that when, in January 2006 Wal-Mart announced the opening of a South Chicago complex and sought 365 employees, it received more than 24,000 applications. Yet apart from a few veteran labor advocates like Michigan Congress member John Conyers, there is no Congressional voice to address this question.

Until December 1999 when thousands converged on a Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization there was little protest in the streets as a significant portion of America's industrial base was being dismantled. But the United Steelworkers, the West Coast International Longshore and Warehouse union, feminists, anti-sweatshop activists and a fairly large contingent of young "anarchists" came together in a disjointed, uneasy coalition.

A portion of the protesters engaged in direct action and succeeded in shutting down the city for a few days, but more dramatically called attention to the systematic anti-labor and anti-developing world actions of transnational capitalism and the US state. Until September 11, 2001 Seattle was the inspiration for a half dozen major demonstrations in Europe and the Americas and for the organization of the World Social Forum which remains to this day a gathering for the world's anti-globalization and global justice activists and intellectuals. There is a significant difference between the anti-globalization movement and those who seek global justice. The former unconditionally oppose the free flow of capital and the subordination of the developing world to its imperatives. "Global justice" like human rights signifies an effort to improve the terms and conditions of subordination.

There is no doubt that the attack on New York's World Trade Center put a damper on direct action; in the fervor of patriotism and national unity that followed the disaster it seemed to many unadvisable to contest the streets of a wounded country. Political reticence reigned on the broad left until February 2003 when, in an uncharacteristic burst of defiance, millions took to the streets in large and smaller cities to oppose the Bush administration's plan to invade Iraq. But, after the invasion protest ebbed, and opposition again took the traditional forms of letter writing and visits to Congress members. Yet after its swift removal of the Baathists and Saddam Hussein from power donned in a combat jacket Bush confidently announced the end of the "military phase" of the war from the deck of an aircraft carrier. If the administration actually believed its own rhetoric it was soon to be deeply disappointed. Having demobilized the Iraqi army the US military neglected to disarm its more than 100,000 soldiers. Many of these former soldiers used their weapons against the conquerors and their Iraqi collaborators. By summer, 2003 the military found itself fighting a guerilla war against a substantial fraction of the Iraqi population. As US and Iraqi casualties mounted, and the work of infrastructural reconstruction faltered, the Vietnam syndrome – earlier proclaimed dead and buried after September 2001 – descended on the Bush administration: recruitment to the voluntary military services declined, popular sentiment began to move away from support for Bush, and only the milk toast Democrats stood in the way of his almost certain electoral defeat in the 2004 presidential election.

By the end of 2005 polls showed that a majority of Americans disapproved of the war and despite his narrow 2004 victory against an unimaginative

Democratic opponent, the president's approval ratings had dropped from more than 75% following September 11 to about 43%. But while polling may be a rough measure of how a largely demobilized public responds to events and to the current political environment, it would be a serious mistake to rely on them as predictors of election outcomes, policy imperatives or a reversal of fortune for the political party in power. Yet this is exactly what has warmed the hearts of the opposition, such as it is. In the main, it seems to have forgotten the lessons of the past and present: the political system is rigged, its leading actors lack the elementary requirements of political independence from big money, and the Democratic Party is part of the problem, even if not at the cutting edge of perfidy.

Compromising its Way to Oblivion

That the Democratic Party had largely abandoned its own New Deal legacy even before the so-called Reagan revolution remains hidden from view to this day. It was Jimmy Carter and Ted Kennedy, arguably the leading liberal in the Senate, who introduced deregulation of banks and trucking in the late 1970s. These measures resulted in huge consumer interest rates and eventually broke the back of one of the sterling achievements of the Teamsters union long distance hauling agreements: to take labor out of competition with itself on an national scale. And this was the period that witnessed the rise of global agencies such as the US supported World Bank and International Monetary Fund to take key responsibility for devising new forms of subordination of developing countries, chief among them was the award of billions in loans to the states of Africa, Latin America and, as the Soviet economy slowly sank into stagnation and crisis, Eastern Europe. In return, these states agreed to temper redistributive programs such as social welfare, to pay back their loans at world interest rates, and to strengthen the hand of central governments to suppress land reform, workers' insurgencies and other forms of popular protest. During the Carter years, a Democratic Congress and Democratic administration failed to enact national health insurance, to end the thirty year reign of the anti-labor Taft-Hartley amendments, nor restrain deregulated interest rates which by the late 1970s reached 15% or more. The left and the liberals were so enamored by Carter's foreign policy initiatives, especially his effort to bring Israel and Egypt together to make peace in the Middle East that, except for a few unions which mounted something of a campaign against deregulation, they remained silent.

The last hurrah for the liberal wing of the Democratic Party was Ted Kennedy's 1980 unsuccessful primary fight against the incumbent, Jimmy Carter. It proved to be an uphill battle because of Chappaquiddick but also many of his erstwhile supporters were more loyal to the party than to liberalism. Hobbled by the seemingly endless Iran hostage crisis and the short-lived ideological split in his party, Carter's defeat in 1980 signaled a new wave of reaction. While the Reagan administration failed to privatize social security, this was perhaps the only significant setback of his administration's eight year reign. But more crucial than legislative battles, the Reagan era marks a decisive shift in American politics of which we are still captive. Once viewed even by his Republican opponents like George H.W. Bush, as a right wing lunatic, Reagan's political strategy has proven to be a blueprint for the Right and has succeeded in driving the political debate. From the arms buildup, ostensibly undertaken to bankrupt and ultimately overturn the Soviet Union, – a program that provided the right with one of its sustaining myths that it was he who caused the collapse in 1991 – to the Iran/Contra affair from which, despite the Democrats' best but inadequate efforts to pin the elephant, and his program of "starving the beast" of social programs, even as many of his associates were forced to resign in the wake of scandals, Reagan escaped largely unscathed. Dubbed the Teflon president Reagan's survival was due mainly to the Democrats' fear to impeach Reagan for blatant violations of the law. To this day the prevailing national policy remains military keynesianism amid incessant efforts to reduce social spending, privatization of almost every major federal function, and an aggressive interventionist foreign policy to overthrow or undermine socially progressive or anti-American authoritarian regimes. When, in the wake of Bill and Hillary Clinton's woefully ill-conceived and failed efforts to provide universal national health insurance through the private insurance companies, and other fumbled policies, the Republicans won both houses of Congress in 1994 for the first time since 1946, any chance for a new beginning in providing public goods was indefinitely postponed.

The Democratic leadership has drawn lessons from the Reagan era: the old policies of imposing a progressive tax system on the wealthy and the potential resort to deficit spending to provide jobs and income for the long-term unemployed, public housing, and a genuine national health program based on the principle of public financing, is forever deep sixed. Instead the party's platform is to maintain and to defend most what social movements won from the 1930s through the 1960s, – the shards of the New Deal, – especially social security and higher minimum wages but, wherever possible, to accommodate

to the right's foreign and domestic agenda without offending its base of Organized Labor, blacks, Latinos, environmental organizations, and women. This delicate balance is abetted by the subordination of Organized Labor and the old social movements to the national party, right or wrong. Since Clinton the Democratic Party stands for free trade, favors moderate nominees for Supreme and District Courts, justifies its support of deregulation and renounces big government by making a balanced budget its fiscal signature. In short, the party is deeply committed to the center-right. In the 1990s the liberals fretted and fussed and wrung their hands but were reticent in the face of Clinton's rightward swings because he seemed to be able to frustrate the most atrocious policies of the ultra-right. During this period the liberals disappeared as an independent force.

The basic question is why do liberals and a considerable fraction of the left cling to the Democrats? The superficial justification is that in a winner-take-all system of electoral politics, third party progressive or radical electoralism is widely perceived as "throwing away my vote". Consequently strategies range from building citizen pressure on key issues to keep a recalcitrant Congress in line, to more ambitious plans to construct a "party within the party" that in its most articulate expression would one day dominate the Democrats' program. Such was the implicit aim of Howard Dean's dramatic rise during the 2004 presidential primaries which, beyond the candidate's own moderate domestic program, managed to scare the party's establishment. Remember, after sustaining a string of defeats at the upstarts' hands, a coalition of the various elements of the establishment – in the first place the Clintons and their wide network – the main line of the AFL-CIO and the media, waged a witheringly frontal attack on Dean, which capulted the Senate backbencher, but independently rich and decorated Vietnam veteran John Kerry to the nomination. The party's left swiftly shifted its loyalty, money and energy to Kerry who proceeded to run a typical Democratic snooze-inducer race.

But a deeper analysis is needed to understand why the strategy of 'a party within the party' is improbable and for practical purposes nearly impossible. After all, it may be argued, didn't the Right take over a moderate to conservative Republican Party by the early 1990s? And didn't the left-liberals nominate George McGovern to the Democratic presidential candidacy in 1972? These appear to be parallel cases of successful insurgencies. But a closer look at the two cases reveals an underlying difference. The Right wing campaign to take

over the Republican Party was a well-planned thirty year effort that was marked by a level of ideological radicalism unknown in recent American history, at least within the major parties. McGovern captured the nomination because he opposed the Vietnam war, even as most of the party heavyweights stood by Nixon, or at least refused to take a flat-out stand of opposition. He was, in effect, a single issue insurgent. In contrast the Right presented itself with a full-blown vision for America which embraced almost every major political issue. Despite the fact that McGovern was a good liberal on domestic issues, he probably could not have been nominated without the grassroots anti-war movement and the split in the Democratic Party and the corporate establishment on the war.

His defeat led to a major shakeup within the party. The peace forces were routed from their newly-won party offices by a centrist coalition of leaders of the Congressional party, major funders, most of whom were corporate types and rich individuals, and the all-important leaders of the AFL-CIO which, with few exceptions, notably the United Auto Workers and the public employees unions (but not the Cold War-led Teachers), sat out the election campaign after their candidate was defeated at the convention, thereby insuring McGovern's rout. By 1974 the center-right reclaimed the national party and the interlopers had been cleaned out of most state and local Democratic committees. Heartened by Richard Nixon's troubles, the centrist Democratic leadership, in alliance with an important coterie of members of the Eastern financial establishment which had organized as the *Bi-Lateral Commission*, prepared to regain the presidency after eight years in the cold. The corporate types were determined to restore the legitimacy of the capitalist state and were equally clear that only a squeaky clean Democratic centrist who was free of the taint of beltway politics could win. They looked at the demographics of the country which had already indicated a decisive population shift to the South and Southwest and nominated a moderate former Georgia governor, Jimmy Carter.

After waging a ferocious battle within the party for power between 1967 and 1972 what did the liberals do? Discouraged by their defeat and, without the war to propel their dissent, they returned to the fold and supported Carter, despite his social conservatism, a capitulation that revealed the essential opportunism of their support for women's rights and for sexual freedom. Some were awarded portfolios within the Carter administration, but none achieved cabinet status except, perhaps the secretary of Health and Human

Services, Joseph Califano, whose liberal credentials were somewhat suspect. As is the wont of liberals, they compromised their principles and gave up their fight for power within the party. But the now victorious centrists, sobered by their earlier intra-party loss, vowed never to be caught napping again. After fielding one more liberal who, nevertheless, tempered his New Deal past and presented himself in the Carter mold, in 1984 former Vice-President Walter Mondale of Minnesota was humbled by a seemingly invulnerable Ronald Reagan. In 1988, with the Republican presidential candidate, the incumbent vice-president George H.W. Bush literally reeling from the perception that he had completely yielded to the Right in his party, and White House scandal, the Democrats nominated a Massachusetts governor, Michael Dukakis, who ran an issueless campaign that revealed the party's new centrist orientation. Dukakis trumpeted his administrative and technical abilities, a position that foreshadowed Al Gore's technocratic claims twelve years later. Unfortunately he lacked elementary rhetorical skill required of a national candidate and, like every Democrat since Harry Truman, pandered to the right on national security and when he failed to address the crime issue in an appropriate way when the Republicans mounted the "Willie Horton affair" he went down in flames.² Instead he tried to portray himself, somewhat absurdly, as a strong proponent of national defense by taking a photo of himself atop a tank, dressed up in a military uniform. But to acknowledge the need for a strong military establishment, a skewed tax system that favors the wealthy, and consequently a relatively weak social welfare state, is a formula for permanent political marginality, a condition that even the charming, but deeply conservative, Bill Clinton was unable to remedy. Recall Clinton won the presidency because of the split in the Republican Party which culminated in the third party candidacy of billionaire businessman Ross Perot. Victorious and with a solid Democratic Congress, Clinton proceeded to preside over nearly a decade of political stalemate, White House scandals, and the erosion of the already weakened welfare state. Despite his badly mismanaged health care proposal, Clinton made history. Fearing that he was losing support because he was tagged by the right with the L-word and weakened by a

² Willie Horton was convicted of rape and served prison time in a Massachusetts prison. Governor Michael Dukakis granted his release after a prison board found that he had been substantially rehabilitated. But shortly after his release Horton repeated his egregious behavior in Maryland and was apprehended. The case became a key Bush campaign ad that alleged Dukakis was "soft" on crime.

resolute Republican Congress, he signed away income guarantees for the poor in the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, as only a Democrat could do.

Modern liberalism is, by definition, a movement of compromise because it is deeply committed to the capitalist status quo and attempts only to make it somewhat more humane by providing some relief for those without resources and securing a limited menu of rights for labor, racial minorities, women and the disabled. It is essentially, as was its predecessor, progressivism, a movement from the top; its primary constituency is the disaffected middle class, but its key agents are a fraction of the political directorate and the corporate bourgeoisie who, a century ago, recognized that untrammelled capitalism might rouse a genuine opposition and ultimately lead to dire consequences for the system. That it was brilliantly successful for sixty years had as much to do with a roused working class that carried the burden of the 1930's economic crisis on its own shoulders and demanded more radical measures than even the New Deal had initially been prepared to institute, the complaints of farmers and the new middle class of professionals who were similarly encumbered with foreclosures, high unemployment rates and class degradation. For the past forty years liberalism is at bay and since the Reagan era, it has been rendered illegitimate by an unyielding and incessant rightist campaign of vilification which has transformed the term into an epithet to which the liberal response has been to say "who me liberal"?, and to accuse its adversaries of waging ideological combat.

Precisely. The Right is victorious because, unlike the liberals and their leftist supplicants, it offers a coherent account of the economic, political and social situation based on fear, nationalism, religious moralism and militarism – an ideology which it wears proudly. The Right is by no means encumbered by electoral maneuvers. It has waged political, cultural and ideological warfare on a broad front. Over a forty year period it has maintained an uncompromising legislative program to strengthen the coercive powers of the state, to reduce social spending to its absolute minimum, and to assert United States imperial interests on a world scale to the point of engaging in military action, when necessary. Its institutions have trained two generations of intellectuals to write, speak and perfect its ideas, cultivated a corps of candidates and other public officials to carry its ideas into the electoral arena and to the institutions of private and public education, social, national security, and health policy, and acted like a movement dedicated to cleaving society around its claims.

And the Right has been able to accept loss in order to assert its principles such as it did during Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential catastrophe. After

1964 it conducted a thirty year effort to conquer the state. Well financed by money derived from foundations such as Olin, and leading figures in oil, arms and food corporations, among others, it established a phalanx of think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Manhattan Institute and a host of others; bankrolled magazines, newspapers such as the *Weekly Standard* which is edited by William Kristol the son of Irving Kristol, the Godfather of neo-conservatism, and formed or supported public relations firms that fed the media with right wing propaganda masquerading as news. In this regard Fox News Channel, a Murdoch television station, is an entirely reliable voice of the Right. It did not hesitate to intervene in intellectual as well as political life, supporting the organization of the *National Association of Scholars* and the *Center for Popular Culture*, whose main mission is to wage a red-baiting campaign on the academic left, even as liberal publications such as *Commentary* became, under the about face of editors such as Norman Podhoretz, conservative to right wing sheets or, like Martin Peretz's *New Republic* a magazine that seems to have adopted the playbook: relatively progressive in economics, politically centrist and socially liberal to conservative.

The Right is radical and has ideas of how to comprehensively organize society to benefit its base: large corporations, fundamentalist religious institutions, small town merchants and other business interests, and a considerable fraction of the professional-managerial class. The liberals are neither radical nor committed to the interests of their base. They stubbornly cling to a piecemeal approach to societal problems and disdain coherence because it might label them as ideological. But they have a seemingly infinite capacity for compromise. In fact, especially on trade, military spending, social issues, and civil liberties they have been willing to sacrifice the interests of their base in order to prove their mainstream credentials. The Right targeted the Republican Party because, except for its ability to win presidential elections, until the advent of its most effective political intervention, Reaganism, the party wandered in the wilderness in most Democratically controlled state houses, cities and, of course, Congress. The reinvigorated right drove out Congressional caretakers such as Robert Michel, the perennial minority leader, and replaced them with bona fide Southern ideologues such as Trent Lott, Bill Frist, Newt Gingrich and Tom Delay who vowed to take no prisoners in their march to power. During these thirty years it operated as an independent force and refused to be subordinated to the compromises Republican legislative leaders felt obliged to make with the liberals and moderates. Assisted by the

politically astute Reagan administration during which the liberals found themselves outmaneuvered and outthought, but also by a Center-Right Clinton White House which, in its first two years, was effectively stymied by its own confused identity and conservatism, in the 1994 midterm Congressional and State elections it was ready to make its move with Newt Gingrich's *Contract with America*, a manifesto of a new right that outlived Gingrich's rule over the House of Representatives. His demise illustrates another key feature of our times: the liberal faith that corruption scandals involving leading right-wing politicians are enough to guarantee their victory is delusional. The Right can bear these setbacks because it has a party line that outweighs individuals. They can always bring up new cadres to replace the deposed. From scandals involving Oliver North to Gingrich to Louis Libby they barely felt the heat. In contrast, the liberals have only the memory of their heroic past, a host of personalities without substance, and the will to accommodate to offer a restive and suspicious electorate. But Hollywood stars and glamorous young politicians do not a party make. By the time Gingrich went down in 1998, the liberals and the left had compromised themselves to helplessness.

The New, New Social Movements

The abject failure of liberals to hold the line let alone make significant gains, even in the direction of piecemeal reform, and the firm hand of the Republican Right over the repressive state apparatuses such as the police, the vast prison system, the courts, and the military, has prompted many to form strong anti-electoral, almost anti-political grass roots movements and advocacy organizations which have no organic ties to the older civil rights, feminist and environmental groups. Since the mid-1990s a new generation of activists has occupied the space of opposition. It is uncompromising, and often anti-capitalist. Its forms are mainly: anti-globalization protests; on the campus graduate assistants sought and gained union organization in some of the most prestigious private as well as public universities; undergraduate campaigns against sweatshops and more recently against the Coca Cola company's anti-labor policies in Latin and Central America have driven that soft drink from a host of campuses; in some towns and cities residents have resisted gentrification and organized movements that occasionally elect radical local officials; the World Social Forum, and several regional social forums, an outgrowth of anti-globalization protest seek to widen, and in some instances,

to moderate their anti-capitalist character by supporting efforts to reconstitute a new civil society; and a variety of “social justice” initiatives on the labor, anti-hunger and human rights fronts have posed new challenges to the flagging older feminist and civil rights movements. To which we might note the Green Party and the Labor Party which, in different modalities share many of the anti-establishment values of the newer movements. There has emerged a “generational divide” because the older organizations have, at least in the eyes of their younger beholders, lapsed into lethargy born of both bureaucratic rot and cooptation by the Democratic Party establishment.

These movements and organizations operate quite autonomously and independently from each other. They share, often unwittingly, what I call a postmodern approach to politics. That is, conditioned by the failure of the Old Left, the left Democrats, to offer significant oppositional politics, they tacitly and explicitly avoid forming an alliance which might offer a systemic alternative to the prevailing transnational capitalism. Instead they have advanced the slogan and the practices of “protest and resistance” and, in the main, have settled for a politics which, I argue, behind their backs ends up as a radical version of pluralism, the leading political ideology of American liberalism.

Time for a New Party?

If these arguments make sense we are desperately need a conversation on the possibilities and ways and means for the creation of a new radical party of the left. It would have to integrate the perspectives of the new grass roots radicalism with a new concept of the “party”. It would be an educator, organizer within social movements, creator of independent media both in hard copy, on television and on the internet, and theoretical center for a new conception of socialism that agitates and organizes for popular control over economic and social resources. While one may be critical of the anarchist wing of the anti-globalization movements, it is hard not to appreciate its creativity, energy and anti-authoritarian impulses. Although Marx and the democratic radical tendencies in marxism can offer much to this project, it should not reproduce the serious distortions of the past that were perpetrated in the name of Marxism: undemocratic centralism, dogmatism, third worldism and the egregious tendency of many to justify or apologize for the authoritarian practices of “socialist” countries, whether the former Soviet Union, Mao’s

China, Vietnam or Cuba. Altogether I am convinced that without a new political formation that can combine the characteristics of an electoral vehicle with those of the extra-electoral – cultural activity, education, strengthening and building grass roots movements against all sorts of gentrification and transnational capital's development plans, and creating new communities – the dire predictions of Luxemburg and of the anti-fascists of the 1930s and 1940s will likely come true. The greatest danger is that we will remain burdened by the past. Under these circumstances the left will find itself caught in the tangled web of fragmentation and, for this reason, will sink even further into marginality and oblivion.

Reference

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