

History - The Roots and Contemporary Crisis of the American Ideology

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Surveying the political scene in America, we are witnessing now the shattering of the last remnants of the American ideology that, despite enormous strains at times, held in place for almost 70 years. The ideas that had justified the American economic and political system in the minds of most of our citizens throughout that long period had come under stress in earlier storms—the economic and political crises of the 1950s to the 1970s in particular—and a few beams and joist had cracked, but had not given way. Today the manifold crises of capitalism mean that the entire existing intellectual structure of modern American capitalism is breaking up. And because of the role that the U.S. capitalist class plays in the world, this represents a crisis of world capitalist leadership and legitimacy. The question arises then, what will the country's rulers attempt to put in its place, and what alternative explanation will we on the left and in the labor movement be able to offer to the country's working people?

After World War II, Republicans had warily accepted Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal as the basis for the American economy—once the conservative Taft-Hartley labor law was passed—and the two parties had united around a bi-partisan foreign policy aimed at containing Communism. American hegemony in the capitalist world, based on the destruction of Europe and Japan, and the dangerous balance of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, made possible both a Pax Americana and economic prosperity in the United States. At the same time, the American elite, the Establishment that ruled and reasoned on behalf of the banks and corporations, promoted in the post-war years a new explanation and rationale for our political and economic system and for our society. American politicians and government officials, the media and the churches, schools and universities had beginning in the late 1940s and continuing through the 1960s created and propagated a set of interlocking and mutually reinforcing ideas about our government and society, an ideological structure that came to be widely accepted by most of the people most of the time. These ideas—fundamentally different, by the way, than the Gilded Age ideology of 1870 to 1900 or the Progressive Era ideology that had held sway from about 1900 to 1941—constituted a genuine worldview.

The American ruling class constructed a set of ideas that not only justified its domination of the economic and political system but one that also encompassed virtually every aspect of life, from the boardroom to the bedroom, from the factory floor to the football field, from the house of prayer to the counting house. The American capitalist class believed itself not only to be justified in ruling the

United States but also vindicated in its attempts to impose its economic model of corporate capitalism together with its particular conception of democracy on the entire world. America, they argued, with its unlimited natural resources, its free enterprise system, its profusion of products and the high standard of living they provided, with its equal opportunity and religious toleration, with its slow but steady progress toward full racial integration, and its opposition to totalitarianism of all kinds made it the model not only for North America, but for the world.

While “the ruling ideas of every period are the ideas of the ruling class,” as Marx once wrote, the rulers’ ideas do not sit lightly and comfortably on every social group, and certainly not on every individual. After all, all the civilizations we know have been class societies based on oppression and exploitation, producing resistance and sometimes rebellion. Every society even in the most stable times has its iconoclasts, critics, rebels, and troublemakers. However, what makes an ideology successful is its ability to dominate the intellectual, cultural, and moral universe of a society for most people most of the time. That was certainly true of the post-war American ideology from when it emerged in the late 1940s until the 1970s when it came under great stress, but still did not give way, until finally in the 2000s when a host of economic and social forces blew the ideological framework apart. Once the American elite’s worldview held everything together. Today ideas, facts, and opinions—ripped from their ideological mooring—blow through the social media and the popular consciousness like the debris scattered by a hurricane

The Bernie Sanders campaign of 2016 has not been responsible for shattering the old American ideology, that process of demolition began years before and peaked more recently with the Occupy Wall Street movement and then Black Lives Matter. Bernie Sanders took up the issues of those movements and honed them into a powerful message about the role of money in politics, the growth of economic inequality, the need for racial justice, and even talked about ending a foreign policy based on “regime change.” By taking the criticism of the status quo to the level of national presidential politics, Sanders’ campaign shone klieg lights on the class character of our government and the inequalities in our society. By that light we see the wreckage not only of an ideology but the breakdown of our society.

The Post-War American Ideology

What was the American ideology that first emerged in the post-war period as a result of the United States’ victory in the war and its domination of the world economy? What was the worldview that the elite—the capitalist ruling class and its constellation of political and intellectual associates? How did the American capitalist and political classes see the world and how did they explain it to others?

1. A Classless Society - America has achieved social harmony within a relatively egalitarian society, fundamentally middleclass in character, in which distinct social classes no longer exist and therefore class struggle had also disappeared. America’s egalitarian middle class society was made possible by the social mobility based in part on individual initiative and in part on meritocracy that enabled an individual to move from one social layer to another (as defined by education and income – not class). In our society, every American has an equal opportunity to succeed—and most do. [Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology*, 1960.]

2. A Pluralist Democracy - America has come out of World War II as a nation representing a middle way in the philosophy of government between the dangerous extremes of Communism and Fascism. American government is fundamentally democratic in character, not only because it is a republic and a representative democracy, but also because of capitalist competition tempered by our regulated economy. The two-party system organized respectively around conservative and liberal

ideals, serves to incorporate all citizens in a uniquely stable political arrangement. Above all, however, America is democratic because it is subject to pressure groups of all sorts, from business and labor to farmers and homeowners. America's democratic-pluralist society [Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, 1965]

3. An Economic Model of Prosperity. America's corporations have produced a consumer society that makes life better for all of us.. American corporations collaborating with the labor unions that represent about a third of our country's workers are providing long-term, stable jobs, decent wages, and benefits such as health insurance and pension; all of which contributes to a high standard of living that improves with every generation. To protect Americans from monopolies that might cause economic harm, the U.S. government regulates utilities such as electric power, gas, and telephone, but otherwise the free market prevails. But since markets don't always work perfectly, following John Maynard Keynes, the government intervenes to help the unemployed, the poor, and the elderly. [Paul Samuelson, *Economics*, 1948.]

4. A Social and Racial Democracy - America is fundamentally a social and racial democracy in which all immigrant groups are gradually assimilated and find security and opportunity. Negroes, Latins, and Orientals in the North and West might encounter difficulties, but they too will eventually find a place in America through modest government encouragement and their own initiative. If there are more poverty and crime in the Negro and Latin ghettos, it is because of economic and social problems that can and will be ameliorated. The South, however, represents a distinct region with its own history and customs, but it will be gradually reformed and become part of the American mainstream.

5. A Judeo-Christian Society - America is a nation based on Judeo-Christian values. While Protestants founded this country, religious toleration had made it possible for Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Jews to participate in all of the country's economic, social, and political institutions. The American economic and political elite will be strengthened by the inclusion of these other groups and the rest of the society will be enhanced as well by their incorporation.[E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America*, 1964.]

6. Equality and Fulfillment for Women - Women in America enjoy full equality, not only the right to vote, but also the right to work in virtually any and every field. Many more women and girls now seek higher education and work in the professions. Even women who work, however, find fulfillment as housewives and mothers, as leaders of the Parent Teacher Association, Girl Scouts, and other organizations in their communities. Women today, relieved of many of their domestic chores by such labor saving devices as washing machines, have a freer and fuller life than ever.

7. Individual Self-Realization - Through a combination of faith, psychological counseling, and if necessary medication, all Americans can become well adjusted, that is they can find not only contentment but self-realization. The new psychologists approach the patient without prejudice, offering their unconditional respect for each individual so that he or she can find their own solutions to life's challenges. The point is that our society not only offers a higher standard of living, but also personal fulfillment. [Carl Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy*].

8. Inexhaustible Natural Resources - America is a land blessed with inexhaustible natural resources of every sort, from rich soil and great forests, to coal and iron and gas and oil. Modern science, particularly chemistry, has provided herbicides and pesticides that have made possible an agricultural revolution. We now provide food not only for America, but for the entire world. While corporations exploit our natural resources for the benefit of all, our country had also wisely set aside land as nature preserves in national parks in the mountains and along the seashore to protect wilderness and wildlife.

9. American Exceptionalism - Our nation is exceptional: a city on a hill, an example to the world. Americans, thanks to our democracy and prosperity, are a superior people: better fed, housed, and clothed, better educated, and better paid. Our people embody in their lives as businessmen, professionals, and as working people the American ideals of democracy and free enterprise. Our history, our culture, and economic and political system allow us as a nation to play a leading role in our hemisphere and in the world at large, helping through our example, through foreign aid, and when necessary through diplomacy or at times military intervention to move the world forward toward peace and prosperity.

10. A Benevolent World Power - On the world stage the American government working with its NATO allies, as well as with its bloc of democracies in the United Nations, is a benevolent force, dedicated to world peace, economic development and prosperity for all, and democracy throughout the globe. Communism threatened world peace and prosperity, and must be contained and deterred. Over time America's democracy and its higher standard of living will vanquish the political systems of the Soviet Union and China and their citizens would join the democratic world order.

As one can see, there is an architecture here; the ten different beams and joists of this structure fit together forming a unified whole that explains virtually every aspect of American life. The foundation for the entire structure is clearly the idea of economic prosperity and equality of opportunity; everything rests on those.

The Democratic Party—Franklin Roosevelt's and Harry Truman's administrations and the Democratic Congress of the era—largely created the American post-war political economic regime. Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower left the New Deal structures in place and by doing so institutionalized the American post-war order. The Democrats—who had led the nation in World War II, also endorsed the Korean War and led the Vietnam War—played the leading role in creating the nation's imperial foreign policy.

The ideology described in this essay—with all of its ramifications through schools, churches, ethnic organizations, and government at all levels—was largely the creation of Democratic Party aligned liberal intellectuals. Democratic Party liberals provided the strongest justifications for the Cold War and even for the anti-Communist crusade. Historians Henry Steele Commager, author of textbooks such as *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (1977) and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., the biographer of Roosevelt, Truman, and both John F. and Robert Kennedy, represent the archetypal liberal intellectual. Liberal intellectuals justified both the imperial foreign policy and America's social welfare system, so limited in comparison to the social safety nets in the Western European social democracies and in the Communist bloc.

The majority of the American people, especially in the prosperous post-war period of 1945-1960, the era of the G.I. Bill and the Veterans Housing Administration, could and did strongly embrace these ideas and did use them to understand the world and their place in it. America's dominant place in the world capitalist system, its prosperous national economy, and its strong state and domestic social programs meant that most people could see themselves in and through this world view as it came to them daily in the newspaper, over the radio or TV, in church or temple, or in the public schools as well as colleges and universities.

Still, a number of developments—the failure of the South to modernize and democratize, the expansion of mass higher education, the development of the counter-culture, the sexual revolution, the U.S. war in Vietnam, the repeated economic recessions, the development of economic competition with Europe and Japan—all of these would like so many quakes and tremors shake the intellectual edifice that had been built.

The Post-War Worldview Put Under Stress

It is clear at a glance that some of these explanations of American society were weaker than others, most obviously point #4 dealing with racial equality. Black people obviously were not full citizens in America, neither in the South nor in the North, and they did not enjoy equal opportunity economically or socially, as Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), a virtual indictment of America's racial policies, had documented so thoroughly. So it is not surprising that it was that weak beam that first gave way with the rise of the civil rights movement of 1956-1965. Rev. Martin Luther King, the movement he led, and his little book *Why We Can't Wait* (1963) challenged the myth of racial equality. And that beam in the intellectual superstructure broke.

Still, the structure did not collapse—even after the civil rights movement became black power and ghetto rebellions, often in the form of riots and arson, swept the country, as Malcolm X's speeches slashed at the remainder of the doctrine of racial equality. The passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, the corporations' opening up to Blacks of skilled, white collar, and managerial positions, and social welfare programs calmed the Black population. The elite's intellectual carpenters spliced on to the old beam a new one: with civil rights laws and social legislation, it was now claimed, blacks had achieved equality in America. The society, it was declared, was colorblind. The ideological structure had trembled and creaked, but it did not fall.

The U.S. war against Vietnam (1955-1975) tested and nearly demolished another of the principal elements of the American ideology, point #10, that the United States was a benevolent world power. The Vietnamese people's struggle for their independence and self-determination combined with the huge anti-war demonstrations in the United States and around the world all but destroyed confidence in America's benevolence and good will both abroad and at home. The napalm dropped on entire Vietnamese villages not only destroyed those communities—houses and human being alike—but also destroyed confidence in America's good will. The Student's for a Democratic Society (SDS)'s *Port Huron Statement*, projecting the unity of the civil rights, student, and peace movements, continued the pressure on the concept of racial equality but now also challenged the notion of America as a benevolent world power.

After the death of 58,000 Americans and between two and three million Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians the United States finally lost the war. After that it proved impossible for the ruling elite to reconstruct the foreign policy element of the American ideology. Some on the left and the liberals drew the conclusion that there should be no more large-scale foreign wars, while some conservatives drew the conclusion that there should be no more limited wars. The American elite, while in the broad sense still committed to the bipartisan foreign policy of defending U.S. corporate interests around the world, no longer had a common notion of how to do so. One pillar of the ideological construct seemed practically irreparable; and that weak beam meant the entire structure became far less stable.

Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), which signaled the start of the mass women's movement in America, had the effect of taking an axe to another of the central ideological columns of the post-war ideology. Women in America, she argued, were not happy and were not fulfilled in their supposed roles as sometime workers and fulltime wives and mothers. Friedan went on to launch the National Organization for Women (NOW), while other younger women created thousands of consciousness raising groups in communities across the country. The women's movement of the 1960s and 70s then went on to demand genuine equality in every aspect of women's lives from education and sports to employment and political representation. The Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion represented one of the most significant victories, both a practical and

symbolic achievement of the women's movement: control of their own bodies.

Once again, however, the Establishment's intellectual workmen spliced on to the old beam a new one arguing that with the many federal and state laws regarding women—even without the Equal Rights Amendment that died in 1982—women had finally achieved full female equality. Year after year, however, statistics showed that women, particularly working class and poor women, had not achieved parity in virtually any area of American life, and so that beam too creaked when trod upon.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), an attack on the indiscriminate use of pesticides and the chemical companies that produced them, suggested for the first time to a broad public audience the notion that the United States government and the corporations might be endangering the environment. Barry Commoner's *Science and Survival* (1966), examining the impact of science and technology on the environment, and especially his *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (1971), warning of the need to change the country's and world's policies and behavior, offered a profound ecosocialist critique of the old notions of unlimited resources. E.F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), coinciding as its publication did with the country's petroleum energy crisis and arguing as it did that our economy was unsustainable, turned many into environmentalists. By the time of the first Earth Day in 1970, many Americans had come to doubt that the country had unlimited natural resources or that those resources were being conserved. The new environmental movement set thousands in motion and millions began to question the entire economic system, and President Richard Nixon responded in 1970 by proposing the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).. Again important political reforms repaired some of the damage to the ideological structure, even if they did not provide anything like adequate protection to the environment.

Democratic Party liberals, who held power through much of the 1960s and 70s, had responded to the challenges of the era, if only in an attempt to shore up the system. Democratic Party President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-69) expanded the role of the federal government in a manner not seen since the days of Roosevelt in the 1930s. Johnson not only oversaw the passage of the Civil Rights, Voting Rights, and the Economic Opportunity Act acts, but he also pushed through Congress his War on Poverty programs: Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start early education, and the Model Cities urban renewal and housing programs. Nixon too expanded the government's role, not only by creating the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) but also by establishing the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA). Nevertheless, the U.S. war in Vietnam combined with the black urban rebellions at home, frustrated his attempt to resolve the country's political conflicts —conflicts that tore at the ideological system. The country's elite apparently could not simultaneously manage America's world empire and control its restive black population without tearing apart the intellectual justifications for American capitalism and democracy. Millions ceased to believe in the dominant ideology during those years, certainly they did not believe that the country was a benevolent power or a racial democracy.

And then the economy went into an economic crisis. The resurgence of Germany and Japan—their capitalist industries rebuilt after the war with the most modern technology—created stiff competition for the United States on domestic and world market by the late 1960s. Within a decade, American corporations were closing older steel mills and auto plants, laying off hundreds of thousands. OPEC raised gasoline prices. The economic crises of 1974-75 and 1979-81, occurring in times of inflation while leading to official unemployment rates of 10 percent, challenged the fundamental notion that the American economy could deliver prosperity to the majority of its people. Profit rates fell and employers went on the offensive; the post-war social pact ended. Class struggle resumed—but it was largely a one-sided fight, as employers attacked, unions retreated, and workers lost ground. There were no repairs to that part of the ideological structure; like a bad landlord, the ruling class ideologues simply ignored the fact that the ceiling was falling.

The Conservative Attempt at Ideological Reconstruction

The social crises and social movements of the 1960s and 70s and then the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s had made it clear the post-war ideological structure—even with the repairs and renovations that had been made—was failing. The ruling class's lack of a coherent ideological explanation for the various crises taking place in the society itself became a cause of further stress, as the elites recognized. The gods seemed to be failing and the catechism no longer seemed to explain the world.

A group of rightwing ideologues and politicians—first presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, then presidential aide and speech writer (and later presidential candidate) Patrick Buchanan, the Rev. Jerry Falwell, and a number of others—recognizing the opportunity to create a new ideological framework, attempted to construct an alternative worldview organized around a different set of propositions derived from conservative economic and religious propositions. Unlike earlier groups that had sought to refurbish the old intellectual edifice, this group wanted to demolish it. They took as their model something resembling nineteenth century notions of laissez-faire capitalism, combined them with fundamentalist Christianity and a mythical and idyllic vision of an early twentieth century America of family farmers, small businesses, and pious congregations living in blissful harmony. This remains one of the two or three principal conservative visions even today.

With the fall of Soviet Communism, some conservative intellectuals attempted to create a new version of Daniel Bell's *In End of Ideology*. In his 1989 essay "The End of History," Francis Fukuyama wrote, "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." Communism having collapsed, he argued, we would find that capitalism and liberal democracy were the best system. A series of wars, economic crises, and domestic conflicts called that conclusion into question within a few years.

The New Right's notions as they developed into an ideology and a political program would have meant taking a bulldozer not only the gains of the black and women's movements, but also rolling back the labor unions and dismantling the country's social programs. President Ronald Reagan, in fact, promised something like this during his presidency from 1981-1989, and had some successes, most notably his destruction of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Union (PATCO) in the 1981 strike, which initiated a wave of government and private employer union busting. But dismantling the New Deal and War on Poverty Programs proved more difficult than Reagan had imagined, while his Star Wars and other military programs gave an impulse to military Keynesianism. His rhetorical offensive against liberalism and big government only put more stress on the post-war ideology, especially as it came into conflict with his actual practice of expanded military budgets and a growing national debt, though the American economic and social system remained, with some regressive alterations, fundamentally as it had been since 1948.

Reagan's successor, former CIA Director George H.W. Bush, took office in 1989 and plunged into the Gulf War (or First Iraq War) just one year later. Provoked by the former U.S. ally Saddam Hussein's defiant invasion of Kuwait, it was the largest U.S. military intervention since Vietnam; the entire war from preparations to the expected U.S. victory lasted just one year. Though not recognized at the time, the Gulf War was simply the first step into what would be a series of disastrous wars and military actions in the 2000s against Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Middle Eastern, African, and South Asian nations. At the same time the American economy faltered. Bush had inherited a tremendous budget deficit from Reagan, forcing him to work with the Democrats to raise taxes. The economy went into recession with unemployment reaching 7.8 percent, the highest since 1984, just on the eve

of the election in 1992, dooming the first Bush presidency to just one term. Disappointed in the Republicans, the American people turned back to the Democrats.

Into the Neoliberal Era of Austerity

President Bill Clinton, while espousing the Democrats' historic liberal rhetoric, undertook to strengthen the financial sector and expand corporate power and began to roll back the social welfare system while intensifying repression of the lower classes. In what was in fact a period of renewed economic expansion, and even very modest wage gains, we entered the age of austerity. Clinton took up the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996—which had been a central element of the Republicans' Contract with America—saw it through an obliging Congress and signed it. Hundreds of thousands of mostly women and children lost their welfare benefits. Clinton also supported and signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, a huge and complicated law that provided billions in funding for police, 100,000 new officers, and vastly increased incarceration that fell disproportionately on blacks and Latinos.

One of the most important acts of the Clinton administration was the final negotiation, passage, and sign-off on the Free Trade Agreement of North America (NAFTA), which had been initiated by Bush Sr. and facilitated the movement of capital and goods between Canada, Mexico, and the United States, though workers could not move freely. While in many ways a ratification of long term trends toward the integration of the North American economies, it formalized and institutionalized the domination of the great corporations on the continent, giving them access to the capital, land, and natural resources of all three countries, while taking advantage in particular of the cheap labor of Mexico. Labor unions and environmental organizations fought for "side agreements," but they had little impact on future developments. Unions continued to shrink in size, lose their economic power, and decline in political influence.

NAFTA's enactment signaled America's entry into the age of globalization and neoliberalism. The old social pact and ideological paradigm had never bargained for a common market of North America, nor had it contemplated the world production of automobiles in several nations. When the World Trade Organization (WTO) met in Seattle with a proposal on the agenda to admit China—a country where there were no workers rights and virtually no environmental regulations—environmentalists and labor union activists joined together and with demonstrations of 40,000 people paralyzed the city's streets. While that WTO meeting was a failure, China was admitted two years later. American foreign trade would expand exponentially after NAFTA and the WTO's expansion to include China, but after the brief boom of the 1990s, there was no significant increase in workers' wages or standard of living in America.

A friend of Wall Street, Clinton signed the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act (GLBA) of 1998 that repealed two key provisions of the Glass-Steagall Act, thus granting greater latitude to financial institutions by permitting banks to affiliate with securities firms, changes that led to the growth of financial speculation and to the Great Recession of 2008. While Clinton's administration coincided with a period of economic expansion and rising profits, of greater employment opportunities and even briefly of higher wages, his policies accelerated the trends toward increased economic inequality and put unbearable weight on one of the key girders of the post-war ideology, namely, that America was a classless society. The voters turned to the Republicans.

By the millennium, when President George W. Bush (2001-2009), son of the former president and himself former governor of Texas, became president, one could hear the post-war ideological structures groan and whine. Though Bush was a Republican and a self-conceived conservative, he

expanded government social programs more than any president since Lyndon B. Johnson. As under Reagan, with both the military and domestic budget expanding, the government plunged deeper into debt. All of that would put him at odds with the rightwing of his own party dominated by fiscal conservatives. Bush, like his father, would probably only have served one term, but the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon turned him briefly into a national hero as he pledged that America would have revenge.

Bush had surrounded himself with a hawkish group known as the Vulcans—Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage—who together used the 2001 terrorist attack as the rationale for wars against the Taliban in Afghanistan and against Saddam Hussein in Iraq, despite no Afghan or Iraqi being implicated in the World Trade Center's collapse. The "Vulcans put forth a remarkable series of new doctrines and ideas, ones that represented a dramatic break with the foreign policies and strategies of the past." (James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, p. xii). These included an aggressive posture toward Korea that went beyond containment and deterrence, a justification of "preemptive" attacks on other nations, as well as calls for regime change throughout the Middle East, often wrapped in the rhetoric of democracy; the fundamental notion was U.S. world military supremacy and domination.

The Vulcans and their views provided theoretical justification for Bush's attack on Iraq, though it had had nothing to do with the September 11 attacks, explained to the public by the outright lie that Saddam possessed of weapons of mass destruction. Though Bush proclaimed victory over Iraq in his "Mission Accomplished" speech of 2003, the war continued into the 2010s, killing hundreds of thousands of people, and virtually destroying the nation of Iraq. (In fact this disastrous war continues today, now having spread to Syria, taking tens of thousands more lives, displacing millions, and virtually destroying that nation too.) Neither the Iraq nor Afghanistan wars ever ended. Bush the hero had feet of clay—covered with blood. To many it was clear by now that far from being a beneficent power, the United States was engaged in permanent war around the world. Moreover, increasingly the U.S. was losing these wars, or at least being stalemated.

Then Katrina. What a disgrace it was. The shameful mishandling of Hurricane Katrina in which 1,836 died and 705 went missing as the Bush administration bumbled, completely discredited his administration. The Wall Street economic crisis of 2008 utterly demolished what little remained of the president's reputation. With the financial crisis—an economic storm of dimensions unseen since the 1930s—the superstructure of American ideology began to burst apart, though it would take eight more years and a presidential primary before we could understand all of the damage and what it meant for conceptions of American society both in the minds of the rulers and the ruled.

The Old Paradigm Collapses

While we did not necessarily recognize it at the time, the U.S. failure in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the 2008 economic crisis spelled the end of the post-war period and of the elite's dominant ideology. The old ideas no longer explained things, and no longer justified things, and so they were accepted no longer. Yet the structure did not simply collapse, held up by the desire of millions to continue to believe, it stood in their mind's eye still looking like home. The election of Barack Obama, America's first black president, heralded as an apparent victory for liberalism and racial progress, obscured at first just how much things had changed. Elected on the slogans of "Hope" and "Change," many expected Obama to deal boldly and forcefully with the Great Recession and end the U.S. involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Many said that the country needed a Franklin Delano Roosevelt, someone who would rescue the financial system, save the failing corporations,

create jobs and lift up the poor. Someone who would save the country's working people—for that's how they understood Roosevelt's New Deal. Someone who would restore the social pact and restore to its place the nation's ideals as enshrined in the post-war ideology.

Obama couldn't, wouldn't, and didn't. The president's \$787 billion stimulus program for infrastructure, health, and education, proved to be inadequate to set the economy in motion—it would take years for the recession to end and for many it never did. Unemployment rates remained high for years, as did home foreclosures and evictions. Nor did Obama push for labor law reform, for immigrant rights laws, or for the environmental legislation that he had promised. The president did work in 2010 to pass his Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA)—dubbed Obamacare—a private insurance plan written by the insurance companies, the health and hospitals corporations, and the pharmaceutical industry—a vast and complicated law that would expand coverage for some, but in deference to the profit imperatives of the private insurance and drug companies, still left 30 million uninsured and millions underinsured and facing unrestrained increases in premiums and cutbacks in benefits.

The ultra-rightwing Tea Party movement, an ersatz grassroots movement financed by the energy baron Koch brothers and other wealthy conservatives, took to the streets in protest against what they called the "socialist" Obamacare bill. A movement of mostly white middle class conservatives from the suburbs, it was the first major conservative movement to take to the streets since the segregationists of the 1960s. And with its racist caricatures of Obama and its Aryan Nation and Nazi hangers' on it resembled them. The Tea Party movement, taking up all of the rightwing causes from opposition to abortion to opposition to conceal-carry laws, soon became a political movement that elected more than 45 congressional representatives, not only making the Republicans the majority in the House but also moving the Republican Party further to the right. Tea Party legislators adopted the strategy of making the Republicans the "party of 'No!'" working to paralyze government. Ironically, it was the Tea Party with its claim that Obama was a socialist—after decades of anti-Communism—that unwittingly reintroduced and legitimated in American society a discussion of socialism.

Meanwhile, sentiment grew that presidents Bush and Obama had acted to save the banks but not the unemployed or those facing foreclosure. On September 11, 2011 protesters planted themselves in Zuccotti Park in the middle of New York's financial district under the banner "Occupy Wall Street." The occupiers called themselves the 99% as opposed to the 1% who owned the nation's wealth and dominated its political system. The occupation grew rapidly in New York and spread within a few weeks across the country as tens of thousands occupied public places, marched on banks and corporations, and demanded an end to the role of money in politics and to the tremendous economic inequality that had come to exist in America. The Obama administration discretely coordinated the suppression of the movement, working with the mostly Democratic Party mayors in cities across the country. There were many beatings, pepper sprayings, some 7,361 arrests in 117 cities in the United States between September 2011 and July 2012, including some indictments for terrorism, and Occupy was crushed. Nevertheless, its impact on the country had been enormous, driving the Tea Party from center stage, and making the issues of economic inequality and the role of money in politics the subject of a national discussion.

Obama's foreign policy proved to be equally unfortunate, though, and because the anti-war movement of the Bush years had collapsed upon Obama's election, there was very little organized opposition. While the United States reduced its troop commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama failed to extricate the country completely from the two wars. The challenge of the Arab Spring revealed that the United States—after initially supporting the repressive regime of Mubarak in Egypt, then dallying with political democracy in one or two countries—preferred alliances with dictators to the risks of social upheaval that might lead to more independent or radical regimes.

Hillary Clinton's program of regime change in Libya became a disaster, while in Egypt the United States supported the repression of the movement and endorsed General Sisi. In Syria, after a failed attempt to oust President Bashar al-Assad, the Obama administration reversed itself and seemed to accept the notion of leaving him in power with the rationale this could end the incredibly destructive and disastrous war that it had helped to encourage. And every week the president sat down and put his initials on the drone kill list, sending missiles into Pakistan intended to assassinate terrorists but often taking the lives of innocents. On the left, there was deep disappointment in Obama, who had seemed to promise so much and had delivered so little.

There was also a war at home. Police officers around the country shot Black men, often unarmed men, on a regular basis, hundreds of them each year. The shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014 was taken up as a cause by the Black Lives Matter movement. Within a month there were tens of thousands marching in protests from New York to Los Angeles. The demonstrators, though largely non-violent, were militant; they blocked highways, disrupted public events, and challenged government officials and politicians. Like Occupy, Black Lives Matter represented a challenge to the entire economic and social system, a system riddled with racist practices; a system in fact to which racism was integral. The Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements, and the country's apparently permanent war footing operated like so many wrecking balls on the old ideology. On the right ideologues such as Senator Ted Cruz, a Republican presidential contender, attempted to lay the foundations for a new national ideology based on Christianity, the Constitution, and capitalism. On the left there was Bernie Sanders.

When the longtime independent and self-identified socialist Bernie Sanders entered the presidential primaries in April of 2015 he initiated what was in fact a campaign as a Democrat, but simultaneously a campaign that seemed to challenge the Democratic Party and everything it stood for. Sanders criticized the party's leaders, its funding, its structures, and its policies. Not surprisingly, the Democratic National Committee worked to prevent him from accessing files, few if any prominent Democrats endorsed him, no Democratic Party fundraisers supported him, nor did the party's think-tanks. Sanders campaigned on the most progressive campaign platform seen in the Democratic Party in decades—ending economic inequality, getting corporate money out of politics, a \$15 an hour national minimum wage, free college education, combatting climate change, fighting for racial justice, strengthening and expanding social security, defending and expanding women's and LGBT rights, and so on—it was as if someone had turned on the lights. To achieve this, Sanders called for a struggle against the "billionaire class" and for a "political revolution." Sanders' social democratic program lit up the American political scene, revealing by contrast the dark and dismal social and economic reality that had developed in recent decades of so much underemployment, low wages, and falling living standards. When Sanders' light came on we could see in striking chiaroscuro not only the struggles of the working class, the suffering of the poor, the selfishness of the rich, and the meanness of government, we could also see the wreckage of the once dominant American ideology.

The long overdue collapse of the post-war ideology will lead conservatives, liberals and the left to propose alternatives, and it is important that we do. Socialism as Sanders defines it, that is social democracy, seems, especially to many young people to be the alternative. Their intuition is right; if limited, it is certainly a start.

A New National Ideology

Yet Sanders' platform by itself will not be enough. We need to go much further. Sanders himself admitted as much, saying repeatedly in stump speeches that real change only comes from the

bottom up. We are at a moment when it is possible to see a new radically democratic ideology emerging from those involved the social movements like Occupy and Black Lives Matter and amongst Sanders' supporters. They want real democracy, not government by banks and corporations. They want a comprehensive national health care system and free public education. They want an end to racism and real economic and social equality for all. They want the government to take steps immediately to deal with the environmental crisis. All of this is excellent, yet it does not go far enough to create a new socialist worldview. We will have to discuss with the millions of newly radicalized students, African Americans, working people of all races and ethnicities, among women and in the LGBT community for a more comprehensive socialist view.

- **The Socialization of the Economy** - We as socialists believe that the banks and corporations and all of the means of production now controlled by small numbers of investors and managers have to be socialized; that is, they have to pass from private hands into the hands of the American people as a whole. This might happen through nationalization, through municipalization, through the creation of cooperatives, or perhaps in other ways, with some kind of democratic planning to coordinate the moving parts of a complex modern economy. This would end the capitalist system and represent a revolutionary change, breaking the power of the capitalist class, and a first step toward socialism.

- **A New Sort of Government** - We as socialists believe that we also need a political revolution. The American political system today, its legislature, its judiciary, and its executive, all serve the capitalist class. They are fundamentally undemocratic institutions. They were from the beginning constructed to be so. We will likely still need representative democracy in the future, but those representatives should come not typically from the class of corporate lawyers as most legislators do today, but overwhelmingly from the working class, from working people of all sorts from teachers and truck drivers, to computer programmers and restaurant workers.

- **Democracy at Every Level** - We socialists think that democracy at the highest governmental levels, however, will be insufficient to create a truly democratic society. We believe that representative democracy must be supplemented by participatory democracy, community control, and workers' control in the workplace will be necessary to allow all of our people to have a voice and a vote in matters of concern to them.

- **Self-Organization of the Oppressed** - Socialism will only function when all groups in society, particularly groups that have historically suffered greater oppression and exploitation—blacks, Latinos, women, LGBT people, the disabled—have the ability to organize independently and on their own behalf. Self-organization must be supported within the left itself, in social movements, labor unions, and political parties.

- **A Democratically Planned Economy** - All of these democratic principles will make it possible for people to work together to plan a new economy dedicated not to profit but to human needs in the broadest sense, not for warfare but for everyone's well-being, while also working to avoid an environmental catastrophe and reestablish some balance with nature.

- **Social Solidarity** - Such a society will be based on the principle of social solidarity, that is of mutual and reciprocal cooperation. We as a people must be committed to working with each other and taking care of each other throughout our entire lives. Our new socialist institutions and values will ensure that working-age adults help provide for children and the elderly, and that those who are well work to provide for those who are not.

The achievement of such a society, that is wresting power from the capitalist class and the state, will required the construction of enormous and powerful social movements, and we can be sure that the capitalists will work at every moment to coopt or crush them. A major obstacle to the building of

powerful labor and social movements in the United States has been the role played by the Democratic Party, always functioning to ideologically disarm, organizationally disrupt, and institutionally incorporate such movements back into the capitalist system. We must work to build powerful independent movements that find political expression in equally independent parties, that is, independent of the capitalist class.

- **New Social Movements** - Social movements such as those in the past—the abolition movement of the first half of the nineteenth century, the labor movement of the 1930s, the civil rights struggles of the 1950s, the student, anti-war and women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the global justice movement of the 1990s, and more recently Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter— are evocative. We need to build powerful social movements that challenge all of capitalism's manifestations in every area of our lives.

- **A New and Reconstructed Labor Movement.** A working class movement and the reconstruction and in many instances the democratization of the labor movement are critical, because workers organized in unions represent potentially the most powerful positive social force in any society. Representing large numbers, the majority of the society, concentrated in significant numbers in workplaces of all sorts from farms, factories and mines to office, universities, and hospitals, workers can, if they are organized, exert enormous economic and social power. We will need rank-and-file movements within the unions to democratize them, to make them more egalitarian, and more militant if we are to change our society.

- **An Independent Party of Working People** - While the Sanders campaign has been inspiring, it remained constrained within the Democratic Party and within our two-party system. America's working people, organized into social movements and militant labor unions, will need their own political party to fight for power if they are to create not only a new majority in Congress and a new administration in the White House, but a fundamentally new sort of government. Major party realignments in American history have been few and the result from major economic, social, or political crises, but we can and must begin now to make the political arguments for independent political action.

- **A Fight for Political Power** - We want to bring about meaningful reforms immediately to benefit working people and our entire society, but we are ultimately interested in seeing working people take power so that the society can be reorganized around their interests and the interests of all. We work to build democratic movements now so that the exercise of power will be democratic when a working people's party comes to power.

It should go without saying that if we are to build a socialist movement it will require not only working class power, but also all of the lessons of the women's, LGBT, and environmental movements of the last few decades. We want a party of socialism, but also of democracy, and of personal liberty. Constructing political vision, a new worldview, is the first step to creating a movement, a party, a program, and a strategy to fight for power in the future.

Dan La Botz
