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The Reluctant Vote

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I hear you. No, I don't really want to vote for Obama, either. He flies drones into the heart of Middle East battles that are antiseptic from the American point of view—they avoid troop losses and even pilot losses—but kill a lot of innocents. He has joined the argument to deny *habeas corpus* to those merely alleged as terrorist. He takes free speech so lightly it seems everyone is now bugged. The NYPD tapes us as we walk down the street, and then decides what to keep in its archives. When I was a kid we were scared to death by stories of how the Russian commies had a mike in every house in Moscow.

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On the home front, he got the main domestic problem wrong—and still does, to some degree. It is not a deficit we must worry about, it is a jobs and wages emergency—in sum, a weak economy. But he began preaching the deficit scare early in his terms, appointed two right-wing people, one a Democrat and the other a charming extreme right wing Republican, to devise a budget balancing plan he himself was wise enough not to accept fully.

But others are using it as a model of good sense, like *New York Times* columnist Bill Keller, former executive editor of the paper. It calls for holding federal expenditures to 21 percent of the Gross Domestic Product, the average for the last forty years. But in those forty years, people have aged, rising Social Security benefits; Medicare has had to bear aging but also rapidly rising healthcare costs; inequality has soared and the level of poverty has not improved; and after a brief interregnum when military costs fell after the end of the Cold War, new wars have cost America a ton. So holding the budget to 21 percent would mean sharp cuts in future social programs. It is an extremist plan, as the Center for Budget Policy Priorities has written.

Indeed, Obama seems frighteningly willing to cut key social programs, already offering compromises on Medicare such as agreeing to raise the eligibility age to 67 from 65. Who at 66 will be able to afford a private healthcare plan after having retired—and now many are forced to retire? And why did he fail to promise not to cut Social Security during his convention speech in Charlotte?

The sad fact is that Obama continues to buy into the austerity myth. Perhaps he is following the opinion surveys. Americans generally rank the deficit as their great concern. But that is circular reasoning. Obama has reinforced that by claiming it is so.

Cutting government spending now will likely lead us into another recession. We must delay any such efforts to reduce the deficit until the economy is back on track. Yet we face a fiscal cliff before the end of the year. Spending will be cut automatically and taxes broadly raised. Many believe Congress and the president will compromise. But how? Will Social Security be thrown to the wolves? Or at least a bit of it?

Even when he does do the admirable thing, such as his $800 billion stimulus in early 2009, he failed to follow it up. The stimulus worked to stop the collapse in jobs and perhaps save the U.S. from full-fledged depression. But Obama then almost never talked about it as a victory. He seemed to fear it would give Republicans something to pick on publicly.

He valiantly cobbled together a healthcare plan. It did not go after the health insurance giants, but anyone who understands the history of healthcare reform in America knows that compromise is the only path. Many of us right-thinking want a single-payer system similar to some in Europe, where government pays for all and controls provider payments, but we won't get it in my lifetime, though maybe yours.

Obama's bill would have covered some 30 million uninsured Americans, about two thirds of those with no insurance. But then Obama did not fight for his bill in Congress, letting Republicans and Democrats duke it out. He lost some quite wonderful provisions in the process, like making Medicare available to all over 55, but perhaps that was a no-win, anyway. And even the Affordable Care Act passed—here's the killer—he didn't boast about its good points to the American people, hiding it under a bushel so that Republicans, who had mounted an effective propagandistic anti-Obamacare campaign, didn't have more fuel for their fire.

So why vote for Obama? Let me count the ways. For all my criticism, I think he's done okay in an environment where okay warrants a grade of A-. The Republican right-wing is extremist and obstructionist. The success of the filibuster has made a Democratic majority in the Senate meaningless. His budget will create some jobs in 2013, if not enough. He has put money into meaningful public investments, from wind energy to transportation infrastructure.

And the fact is that Obamacare is on balance one darned good piece of legislation. It allows anyone up to 26 to stay on their parents' plan; it ends yearly and lifetime caps on reimbursements, it forces insurance companies to pay 80 percent to 85 percent of the premiums they collect out to beneficiaries for claims, as opposed to the average 70 percent or so; it provides full reimbursement for some kinds of preventive care for the elderly and women; and it closes the so-called doughnut hole for elderly prescription drugs, which place a heavy burden on the old.

Most important, it will cover those 30 million. It is less than ideal that millions will be forced to take a healthcare plan, but they will be subsidized. On the other hand, 15 million poor will now qualify for Medicaid when they didn't before. I take benefits to 15 million people quite seriously.

Obama also passed a financial re-regulation bill, known as Dodd-Frank. This has done some

good but not nearly enough,. It is being weakened almost everyday by strong financial lobbying efforts. And Obama did not do enough to work down the mortgage debt of those whose houses are underwater.

So not bad, given the staunch opposition, and I must say a biased and unthinking press. And in summary, here are the reasons to vote for Obama. The first three are the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court. Someone will leave the court in the next four years give several are over 70. We can't abide—the nation cannot abide—another conservative appointment. It could truly undermine democracy.

After that, Mitt Romney as president would try to overthrow Obamacare. He would also do his best to reverse much of Dodd-Frank and replace it with nothing. Wall Street run wild is essentially his motto. Why shouldn't it be? That's how he made so much money. Romney will cut Medicare benefits and some Social Security benefits. Obama may do some of that himself, but far less. He will make those cuts in order to give large tax cuts to the rich. This is the same policy as followed by George W. Bush. Job growth under Bush, not even including the 2008 recession was the slowest in post-World War II history.

As for foreign policy, Obama did some things well. I think he handled Libya pretty well, thinking before acting. The same is true with the very difficult circumstances in Syria. He has tried to restrain Israel's threats to go to war with Iran, a certain disaster. By contrast, Romney talks like the Cold War hawks of the 1950s and 1960s and he would use drones far more aggressively and perhaps even attack Iran.

If you think the Presidency doesn't matter, you are wrong. Think how much damage George W. Bush did as president. And there is no ideal to take anyone's place. I do not know exactly what Obama will do in his next terms, and that bothers me. But if people begin to like Obamacare, and the economy makes something of a comeback, Americans may have faith in future government programs and maybe even substantial increases in taxes down the road to pay for what we so badly need—decent education, more transportation infrastructure, jobs programs for the poor, and on. Wouldn't that be lovely? Maybe odds are slim, but they are zero if Romney wins.

Prudence or Principle? Why I will Vote for Obama and Why I Won't Blame You This Year If You Don't

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In 1968, although I had been elected a delegate for Gene McCarthy from Pennsylvania, I eventually voted for Hubert Humphrey despite my deep opposition to the War in Vietnam and Humphrey's refusal to condemn it. Anything to stop Richard Nixon from taking the White House. (He took it.) In 2000 I was vociferous in opposing Ralph Nader's third party campaign against Al Gore. I know Nader, admire him, but understood that a vote for him was a vote against Gore, effectively reducing his count vis-a-vis Bush. Nader helped cost Gore the election. As a political scientist, I am wedded to the notion that politics is the art of compromise and requires political decisions along the lines of "as compared to what?" and "what's the alternative?" rather than "does this candidate match up with one's highest ideals?" In winner-take-all systems like ours with no proportional representation, third party votes hurt candidates on their side of the aisle, because those votes are stolen from weak versions of the extreme candidates rather than from the others side.

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That's why this year I will again heed Hegel's warning that our political (and sometimes even moral) choices will generally need to be made among competing evils rather than between an unvarnished evil and a palpable good. So I will vote for Obama, despite the President's lame performance at the first debate (and some might say the first term), when he looked no more like a liberal Democrat willing to fight for progressive causes (he even ran away from a chance to defend alternative energy) than Romney looked like the conservative Republican he had campaigned as). Yes, there will be an asterisk on my ballot: *this is a stop Romney vote.

The President has done much I applaud, including health care, the bail-out, the stimulus, bank regulation, promising to close Guantanamo and exit Iraq, slowing the pace of off-shore drilling and the digging of tar sands pipelines, and of course making progressive Supreme Court appointments. He has also done much I deplore: failing even to try to get a public option into his health care plan; bailing out the banks but leaving the money with them rather than helping defaulting mortgage holders (four million strong) and small business owners — to whom the money he gave to the banks never went; offering a stimulus about one half of what it should have been; under-regulating the banks and giving them too much say in the decision-making because his economic team is drawn from the bankers; and not closing Guantanamo

but getting into Libya even as he was getting out of Iraq, with consequences we are still reckoning with; and not slowing the pace of drilling and the building of pipe lines enough even as he opened the seas and the Arctic to drilling – and hence failing to embrace the Green label his opponent threw at him like so much tar-sand mud. On the Supreme Court, he did well enough, though his pace of appointment of other Federal Judges has been inexplicably laggard.

Yet still, compared to the opportunistic, plutocrat-inclined rightist who is his opponent and the Ayn Rand zealot who is the VP choice, I will – no and's, if's or but's – vote enthusiastically to reelect the President. Even Noam Chomsky, far more radical than I am, has said he will hold his nose and vote to reelect – or at least that he would do so IF he were voting in a battleground state. (In fact, he will vote Third Party in Massachusetts). But – and this is the point of this essay – though I will argue with them in the name of consequentialism, and suggest (below) why a third party vote or an abstention probably hurts those least able to bear the costs, I will not this year condemn those at OWS and others like them who refuse to yield their principles in order to practice the politics of prudence. Year after year, one election after another, people like me urge them to put aside high ideals, compromise their commitment to real democracy, and choose the lesser of two evils. And when they do, they gain Pyrrhic victories of limited impact, and watch the system grow more corrupt. They vote for Democrats who in theory oppose money and politics, but who end up opting for expedience to "level the playing field." They watch the carbon energy industry roll the Congress and the White House by changing its mantra from "drill baby drill!" to "frack dummie frack!" and promising an age of cheap natural gas that takes climate change off the table. (Anyone think it's on the table for this election?)

It is not just about Tim Geithner or Austan Goolbee. It is about the President himself. Back in his first campaign for the Presidency, Barack Obama made clear in a 2008 CNBC interview he was (in his own words) "a pro-growth, free market guy." He told Bloomberg media in his first year in the White House that he was "fundamentally business-friendly." His Administration's economic team overflows with "fierce advocates for a thriving, dynamic free market." Indeed, he boasted in that interview, "you would be hard-pressed to identify a piece of legislation that we have proposed out there that, net, is not good for businesses." He predicted he would sign corporate tax cuts "worth over $70 billion. "

So when Occupy Wall Street continues to insist there's little to choose between the candidates, that the system really is broken, maybe they are right. To be sure, it's the only system we have, it beats outright tyranny by a long shot, and it is still subject to reform (isn't it?). Big money advancing the interests of market monopolies may control politics but it still has to go through the voters; it can't buy the White House outright or the Congress directly. But the more we comply with system imperatives, the more we leave the system unreformed; the more we leave power to the mercy of money, the more we legitimate all the alarming deformities of today's democracy. When progressives decide the only way to combat money in politics is more money – "our" money which is purer than theirs – they submit to big money blackmail. The more we allow the wall between democratic politics and the marketplace to break down, the more we turn democracy into oligarchy. If the only difference between our bought Democratic pols and

theirs is that ours hold their noses while benefiting from the corruption, how much of a choice is there really?

To be sure, there are still reasons to try to persuade idealists to enter the realm of . . . let's call it stinking realism. There ARE differences between candidates and parties. Democrats are susceptible to the influence of plutocrats, but they are in theory committed to redistribution and fairness. They refuse to be beguiled by Howard Roark's astonishing speech in Rand's *The Fountainhead* – must be a Paul Ryan favorite – in which he announces: "I come here to say that I do not recognize anyone's right to one minute of my life. Nor to any part of my energy. Nor to any achievement of mine. No matter who makes the claim, how large their number or how great their need. I wished to come here and say I am a man who does not exist for others." President Obama exists for others, and his approach to government rests on the premise that community and the individual are not antonyms.

Even more crucial – and this is always the closer for me – the consequences of the small differences between the Parties have a large and disproportional impact on those who can least afford to bear the burdens. Children, single mothers, the unemployed, the old and indigenous are least prepared to deal with the application of radical Randian principles to their lives, but the most likely to have to suffer their outcomes. At least some of the people who Occupied Wall Street can safely ignore the differences between the Parties because they are white, male, economically secure or employed – or some combination of the above – and are likely to be immune to the effects of a Romney victory. People like me may even benefit economically. But many others, most of them not empowered enough to join a protest, will pay the price of a Democratic idealist's noble commitment to principle. To turn your back on Obama for the best of reasons is also to turn your back on them with consequences hard to justify.

So I will vote Obama and ask others to do the same. But this year my message to to my friends at OWS and to devotees of strong democracy who know that the current national system is at best only marginally democratic will be less astringent. To young people who try to exemplify fairness and democracy in the neighborhood – saying "this is what democracy looks like" – whether they are occupying Zucotti Park, a workplace or a schoolyard, I say only before you vote please think carefully about the consequences! But if you choose to sit this one out, or vote Green or Third Party, I will not blame you if Romney wins, I will blame the President and the rest of us who did too little to make him OUR president and insist he serve not just the "middle class" but also the poor. the marginalized, those with neither audacity nor hope. And let us hope your principled action (inaction) will remind Americans that voting is not the same thing as democracy, that there must be real choices. I hope, if you follow principle, you don't live in a battleground state; but battleground states are battlegrounds in part because the Democratic Party has failed to live up to its own ideals.

If the Romney who shows up for the rest of the campaign is the Rockefeller liberal Republican from Massachusetts – David Brooks says that's who he really is! – and the Obama who shows up as his rival is the feeble professor who can't or won't take on plutocracy, big oil and the Tea Party , then maybe there isn't that much to choose between them. Maybe this is a year when

the only way to vote for democracy is not to vote for either major Party. As the fabled “little old lady” is reputed to have said when asked who she planned to vote for, “oh I won’t for either, it only encourages them.” I am not yet ready to concede that this is true. If only for the sake of the Supreme Court. But I can no longer condemn those who think it is.

The Right, The Left, The Election: The Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, and The Presidential Campaign of 2012

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Every four years those to the left of the Democratic Party go through the same soul searching; to vote or not to vote; build a new party or identify with an existing party; stick with principle or accept the lesser of the two evils: bolster the system or demand an alternative. This kind of soul searching has become a boring ritual and it continues in the shadow of Occupy Wall Street. Too many radicals still refuse to recognize the cost that others will pay – economically, socially, politically, and culturally — when the more reactionary candidate takes office. Third parties remain faced with a single-district, winner-take-all, system that undermines the prospect of sustaining any initial successes and leaves supporters wasting their votes. Old slogans like "Don't Vote It Only Encourages Them!" no longer apply (if they ever did). The presidential election of 2012 remains very close. Limits on campaign spending have been abolished. Especially in swing states, victory might depend upon which party gets more of its mass base to the polls. Not to vote, or exhibit the appropriate partisan sense of urgency, only plays into the right-wing strategy.

From the moment that Barack Obama entered the White House in 2008, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell stated bluntly that the primary goal of the Republican Party was to block the new administration and ruin any chance that the nation's first black president might have for re-election. Action at the grass-roots accompanied this agenda. With funding from the Koch brothers and various right-wing organizations like "Freedomways," the Tea Party took shape. Mostly based in smaller cities and communities in the South and the Mid-West, but also in white immigrant urban enclaves, the Tea Party is overwhelmingly white and petty bourgeois. Its primary constituency is composed of small business owners, independent contractors, non-union workers and farmers. They are educated but resentful of Ivy League types, urban life, and the cosmopolitan and secular character of modernity. Lacking the cultural and social capital of upwardly mobile professional strata, whose style and privileges they disdain, their incomes are mostly above the national average. Fueled by the rhetoric of Fox News and media demagogues like Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck and Michael Savage, and inspired by evangelical fundamentalism, the Tea Party rejected everything associated with the welfare state and the social movements of the 1960s.

Evangelicals and far right groups associated with the Tea Party routinely began referring to Barack Obama as “the affirmative action president,” an Imam, a foreigner who lacked a birth certificate and even he Anti-Christ. His election was seen by conspiracy fetishists as the first step in a takeover of the United States by the United Nations. Indulging in a remarkable form of projection, the political right portrayed Obama as prejudiced against whites. Posters showed him and his family as chimpanzees, portrayed the White House with rows of watermelons on the lawn, and implied that the president was a crack addict. Obama was castigated as an advocate of the (black) welfare cheat, the (Latino) immigrant, the anti-Christian (Arab) terrorist, and anti-family (feminist and gay) forces. His administration was seen as representing the triumph of cosmopolitan and secular intellectuals, liberal elites and “socialist” hopes.

Embarrassed by the foreign policy failings of the Bush Administration, its inability to privatize social security and balance the budget, the Tea Party refused to sit quietly on the sidelines or act as cheerleaders for establishmentarian Republicans. Its members took aim at the largest government intervention in American history involving bail-outs of the auto industry and the banks, health-care and an invigoration of the welfare state, as well as a cultural agenda that allowed for abortion, multiculturalism, secular education, and the need to confront climate change. With the sweeping victory of the far right in the congressional elections of 2010, the Tea Party forwarded a new agenda of capitalist fundamentalism that relied upon old notions of possessive individualism and the invisible hand of the market. This new ideology transformed the GOP and even infected conservative “blue dog” Democrats who constitute a significant minority of the party.

Composed of roughly two hundred thousand, organized locally in about 1000 small groups spanning the country, the Tea Party enjoys “strong” support from about 20% of the voting populace or about 46 million Americans. But its influence obviously transcends its numbers. The Tea Party is not simply an “astro-turf” organization artificially constructed by the influx of cash by elites but a mass movement that has been an ongoing feature of political life in the United States. Mixing laissez-faire economics with parochial populism and evangelical religious zeal, this new right-wing organization is the heir to the “know nothings” of the 1840s, the Ku Klux Klan that ruled the South and much of the Mid-West from the aftermath of the Civil War until the 1960s, the “America First” movement of the 1930s that preferred Hitler to FDR, the partisans of Joseph McCarthy following World War II, the ubiquitous John Birch Society as well as the “silent” majority of the 1960s and the “moral” majority of the 1980s, and the populist advocates of neo-conservatism that marked the Bush Administration. The Tea Party may vanish but its mass base will remain.

Right-wing political power was already evident in the election of 2008. Republicans were burdened with two failed wars; an economic collapse (in which their candidate did not even take a position); a discredited Republican presidential incumbent (Bush); and arguably the worst ticket in recent history (McCain-Palin). They also had to deal with the upsurge of support for a charismatic black Democratic contender who ran a near perfect campaign. Obama still only won the popular vote by 52.3 to 47.7. Whatever his wide margin of victory in the electoral vote, he never had a mandate. In exchange for bailing out banks that were “too big to fail,” the

new president might have demanded better terms and perhaps even the nationalization of Citibank. He perhaps could have called for single-payer health insurance, introduced a jobs bill, and created a bank holiday on foreclosures. He could have addressed the question of poverty. His supporters were shocked by his readiness to compromise over the bail-outs, health-care, and the budget. They were also appalled by his refusal to conduct an inquiry into the Bush administration and its handling of the Iraqi invasion or launch a forceful attack on the Republican Party and the Tea Party.

President Obama was thrown on the defensive amid losses by the Democratic Party in the elections of 2010. He seemed unable to challenge the more conservative elements of his own party or the obstructionism of right-wing Republican politicians and their mobilized mass base. Under any circumstances, following the Republican congressional gains in 2010, the Obama administration seemed bereft of ideological purpose, and politically paralyzed. Its leader seemed woefully out of touch with his former constituency. His willingness to compromise on tax cuts favoring the rich, the budget, and a host of other matters only grew with the feeling that his mandate had diminished. The president's attempt to forge a "post-partisan" politics increasingly appeared not simply naïve, but reflected his capitulation to corporate capital.

Amid frustration over the lingering financial crisis that began in 2007, and the paralysis of established liberal political organizations, some activists and anarchists accepted the challenge made by the Canadian magazine AdBusters to occupy the center of New York's financial district and the heart of global capitalism. Others soon joined them at tiny Zuccotti Park in Manhattan and on September 17, 2011 they began a string of protest marches to City Hall,Times Square, and elsewhere. Occupy Wall Street became an instant media sensation. It generated a chain reaction of other occupations in major cities throughout the United States and nearly one thousand cities worldwide. Occupy Wall Street's slogan "We are the 99%!" highlighted economic inequality and a society fashioned by the Bush Administration in which, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (September 9, 2009), two-thirds of the nation's total income gains from 2002 to 2007 flowed to the top 1 percent of U.S. households. Economic recession and political reaction spurred Occupy Wall Street and its supporters among unions, community groups, and everyday people who undertook the peaceful marches to City Hall,Times Square, and elsewhere.

Concern with the economy quickly blended with a host of other issues. A wide net was cast to gain new supporters. Banners magically appeared and slogans were coined. Tents were pitched, sleeping bags tossed one next to the other, food was donated, first aid stations were manned, and sanitation facilities were imported. Street performers provided entertainment and music. A flurry of practical innovation took place in Zuccotti Park. Political forums spontaneously arose with a host of committees, unwritten rules of procedure to allow even the most shy and reserved to participate, and a general assembly. These radicals had as little use for the Democrats as for the Republicans. The most utopian among them envisioned a new language, a new consensus, and even a new spirituality opposed to traditional ideologies and

“political” forms of conflict. What might be termed the core of the movement is obsessed with the thought of being co-opted by those establishment liberals and those on the periphery of their movement still willing to play ball with capital and the political establishment. With nostalgia for the style of 1968, and a utopian commitment to participatory democracy, its core activists sought to introduce new forms of “horizontalism” that would revolutionize society. Nevertheless, what these radicals thought they were doing was very different from what they actually accomplished.

Occupy Wall Street did not transform politics. But its members actually accomplished a good deal. They were subject to the cunning of history. For they changed the priorities of the very system whose total overhaul they desired. Not the liberal pragmatists or political professionals sitting on the sidelines but the idealists and radical activists of Zuccotti Park pushed the Tea Party and its Republican sycophants off the front pages. Occupy Wall Street energized dormant unions and community groups. Its actions in different cities raised numerous radical issues ranging from free higher education and student loans to aid for the elderly, animal rights, regressive taxation, and the poisoning of the electoral process by big money. Occupy Wall Street gave all these issues a radical spin. It also provided the impetus, pressure, and practical legitimacy for the new emphasis upon public works and the aggressive jobs-oriented left-turn by the Obama Administration. Even more important, Occupy Wall Street shifted the national discourse from the celebration of de-regulation, the free market, small-minded individualism, and a mean-spirited attack upon the welfare state to a new concern with the economic imbalance of power, solidarity, social equality, and the responsibility of government to its citizens.

Much can change in a year. The political landscape is very different now than it was a year earlier. Occupy Wall Street disbanded in the winter of 2012, promising to re-emerge in the spring. Activists envisioned new occupations and there were many plans for workshops in non-violent resistance. But movement energy cannot be placed in cold storage at one point in time and then defrosted at another. There was no way to accomplish that task anyway: Occupy Wall Street prided itself on rejecting bureaucracy, leadership, and organizational discipline. New concerns might have been publicized. Occupy Wall Street might have focused upon Citizens United, which allows for unlimited financial contributions to political campaigns, or defending abortion clinics in conservative state or mobilizing against a privatized prison system that has disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of the poor and people of color. But this would all involve making alliances and working within capitalist democracy. For Occupy Wall Street, it was all or nothing. Core activists refused to distinguish between potential friends within the liberal establishment and staunch enemies within the Tea Party. The spontaneity and anti-systemic radicalism that initially inspired the movement in 2011 paralyzed it in 2012. Nothing happened in the spring or the summer. Mass demonstrations at the conventions of the two major parties never took place. The phoenix did not rise from the ashes. Instead new forms of alienation were generated that might have lasting political results.

Disillusionment was compounded by a certain cynical indifference to institutional politics. Unfulfilled utopian hopes raised by Occupy Wall Street compounded the disappointment with Obama. His campaign of 2007 had raised lofty expectations and his constituency embraced the belief that the nation's first black president would transform the political system and usher in social justice. Even under the best circumstances, realizing such ideals would have been improbable. With the worst economic crisis of modern times, a newly deregulated financial sector, a burst of economic inequality, two catastrophic wars and a neo-conservative foreign policy, made it impossible. Obama brought a cosmopolitan sophistication and an articulate intelligence to the White House that was sorely lacking in the Bush administration. His election was a symbol of pride for people of color and hope for the future. Obama was bound to disappoint. But Obama elected to oversee a system in which innumerable factions and lobbies compete for power on an equal playing field. He was elected the president of a capitalist democracy.

Under this system, serving the interests of capital is the precondition for dealing with all other social and economic interests. Capitalist democracy renders employment upon private investment. Workers thereby rely upon decisions by capitalists to invest. Such is the structural imbalance of class power. At the same time, however, capitalist democracy has democratic elements: regular elections, civil liberties, and the universal franchise. Insofar as capital is becoming concentrated in ever fewer corporations, therefore, its political representatives must usually enter into coalitions with other classes and groups to legislate its concerns. Different sectors of capital are also often in competition. Subaltern groups can intervene in the process. Compromise is built into the system, but always within the existing imbalance of power that marks capitalist democracy. Every progressive politician must take that into account whether this involves making a deal on bail-outs of banks, health-care, immigration, or support for the auto industry. But the constraints embedded within capitalist democracy were forgotten amid the euphoria attendant upon President Obama's election in 2008 and the spontaneous eruption of Occupy Wall Street. The general belief grew: Obama should have done more, he should have done it better, and he should have done it sooner.

Criticisms of this sort are par for the course. No reform is ever good enough; it can always be done better; and it always takes too long. Such views are par for the course. Communists expressed them about social democratic policy in the 1920s and 1930s and socialists directed them against liberals in the aftermath of World War II. Securing an imperiled radical identity is always a matter of utmost importance. Of course, there are completely legitimate criticisms of Obama. His refusal frankly and openly to address the question of poverty – or what Michael Harrington once called "the other America" – is disgraceful. Maintaining the American military presence in Afghanistan until 2014 and using drones in Pakistan has senselessly cost thousands of lives. Congressional investigations (leading to indictments) should have been launched against former officials of the Bush Administration on its handling of the Iraqi invasion. Guantanamo and other noxious prisons should have been closed. The brief window of opportunity that existed after Obama's election for dealing with the banks was probably not fully exploited. He was too timid in confronting Republicans; and he never used the bully pulpit to maximum effect. While so many on the left condemn him as a sell-out, however, far more on

the right consider him a “communist” or a “socialist.” Claiming that most Americans don’t understand the meaning of these political terms is a bit too self-serving: American leftists are not all that clear about them either and employ them abstractly without reference to existing political circumstances.

Fashionable preoccupations with the “communist hypothesis” (Alain Badiou), the virtues of “fanaticism” (Alberto Toscano), and the rehabilitation of “lost causes” (Slavoij Zizek) are useless for rendering meaningful political judgments about conflicting tendencies within capitalist democracy. Perhaps it is because radicals so often lack a meaningful political standard of judgment that they are out of touch. The question is not whether Obama is “really” a centrist sell-out but to which Western socialist leaders and Democratic politicians he should meaningfully be compared. Actually the president is no more or less a “communist” or “socialist” than most European social democratic leaders. Revolution is on the shelf and, in its absence, compromise is unavoidable. Those who believe that legislative gains are possible in a capitalist democracy without support from certain sectors of capital simply don’t understand the system they are contesting. That is especially the case in the absence of a sustainable and organized radical mass movement from below.

Some left-wing intellectuals have argued that the current election is “not about” Obama. But this is like suggesting that a rock concert is not about the main act. World-weary “Centrist” Democrats also like to insist that Obama did nothing exciting and that this justifies their support for him. But that is simply untrue. He succeeded on healthcare, where other presidents failed, with a program that abolishes pre-existing conditions and covers 30,000,000 citizens previously without insurance. He has defended the integrity of Social Security, Medicare, Food-stamps and a host of other programs from withering attack by the right. He has opposed the Bush tax cuts that so radically favored the rich. His administration introduced progressive legislation on energy, mortgages, student loans, and unemployment benefits. It has abolished “don’t ask don’t tell,” protected abortion, endorsed gay marriage, supported women’s organizations like Planned Parenthood, simplified the transition from illegal to legal status for thousands of immigrants, cracked down on their illegal employment of by big business, and effectively challenged Republican efforts to disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of voters. Government bailouts of the banks and auto industries have had more than a measure of success and *The New York Times* (May 1, 2010) described Obama’s oversight legislation for the stock market as “the most sweeping regulatory overhaul since the aftermath of the great depression.” The Obama administration has sought to tax companies that invest abroad and roll back the Bush tax cuts that so radically favored the 1%. Obama has opposed austerity plans for dealing with the financial crisis in Southern Europe, resisted Israel’s plans to bomb Iran, pulled troops out of Iraq, refused to intervene militarily in Syria, opened travel to Cuba, contested the neo-conservative reliance on pre-emptive strikes and contempt for international law; and radically improved the global standing of the United States.

Mitt Romney won his party’s nomination by vacillating between defending the moderate conservatism of his political past and the radically right-wing drift of his party’s mass base. Republicans promised to “starve the beast” that they identify with the welfare state. They wish

to roll back “Obamacare,” turn Social Security and Medicare into voucher programs, maintain existing tax inequities, and oppose unions. Theirs is the world of laissez-faire capitalism, fierce competition, and contempt for the ideal of economic justice. They seek radical de-regulation of markets, abolition of various government agencies, and unbridled free trade that allows for further “outsourcing” and capital flight. Republicans have opposed gay rights and gay marriage. They wish to make abortion illegal, shut down women’s clinics, and render their organizations impotent. Their educational agenda opposes “critical thinking,” evolution, and a multi-cultural narrative. They seek to break down “the wall of separation” between church and state. They wish to abolish limits on campaign spending and institute voting restrictions that would effectively disenfranchise hundreds of thousands among the poor and people of color. They insist upon stronger support of Israel, military action against Iran, intervention in Syria, 100,000 new troops for Afghanistan and Iraq, opposition to bettering relations with Cuba, and a rehabilitation of neo-conservative advisers and policy goals. Republican economic policy would return this country to the gilded age. Their supporters’ cultural outlook is nostalgic for the old world in which white men ruled, and their politics attacks the democratic progress that subaltern groups have achieved. Their patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels, their foreign policy is anchored in notions of imperial hegemony and lack of concern with international law, and their rhetoric conjures up images of fascism on the rise.

Every election is a choice between the lesser of the two evils, but some elections are more important than others. This is one of them. It is not about whether the present administration might have done more, done it better, done it faster – or done it with more flair. Nor is it simply about looming nominations to the Supreme Court or that, historically, social movements tend to flourish under Democratic rather than Republican regimes. Should the Republicans win this election it would serve as a lasting symbolic endorsement for laissez-faire economics, constricting democracy, bigotry, educational autarky, and a foreign policy unapologetically predicated on militarism and contempt for internationalist goals. Those who cannot see the qualitative differences between the two parties, who cannot see the urgency in opposing the powerful reactionary threat, are living in Hegel’s twilight where all cats are gray. Sectarianism has never built consciousness, but rather marginalized its advocates thus leading to still more esoteric definitions of the true faith and further disillusionment. Criticism of the Democrats can begin the moment that they win the election. New threats to political liberty, new crises in foreign policy, compromises and serious budget cuts are on the agenda. Soon enough it will again be time to take to the streets. Countering political reaction today, however, requires partisan support for the radically lesser evil. Too many radical intellectuals are saying: I want to see Obama win but I won’t do what I can for his re-election. They are hedging their bets. Thus, they are ignoring the most basic assumption linking theory and practice: “He who wills the end wills the means thereto.”

The Day After Election Day

By | 2012: vol. 11, no. 4

Casting a ballot for President Barack Obama on Election Day should not be a dilemma for people on the left. The problem is what to do on the day after, I am assuming, as seems likely, that the president wins.

What not to do is clear. After the 2008 election, the president urged the social movements to allow the administration to negotiate with Wall Street and the other interests. They complied. Young people returned to school, blacks glowed with pride, and the labor movement tried to trade acquiescence for his support for the Employee Free Choice Act, which never happened. When movements on the left failed to demand alternative recession policies, the vacant space was taken up by the right, namely the Tea Party. Eventually, in September, 2011, the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement inhabited the empty real estate on the left. OWS operated less on politics than society. It was an attempt to create alternatives—democratic forums, alternative financial institutions, and so on. These kinds of endeavors have a long history in the United States, from the creation of utopian communities in the nineteenth century to the formation of communes in the 1960s and 1970s. But their track record as a vehicle for change is poor. And so it was with OWS.

So, what's to be done. Progressive politics are produced by a combination of organization and ideas. One needs organized people – whether they are striking, demonstrating, petitioning – and good policy alternatives. The recent Chicago teachers' strike is a perfect example of this recipe. The ideas the union promoted have been floating around progressive magazines and blogs for years. Yet Republican and Democratic politicians ignored them, listened to hedge-fund CEOs and foundations, undermined teachers' unions, and shifted public resources into private hands. George Bush's No Child Left Behind (2001) started the process. Barack Obama's Race to the Top (2009) continued it. Obama's program paid states to use student test scores for teacher evaluations and to lift caps on the number of privately managed charter schools, thus draining resources from public schools. The "reform" agenda, begun in Chicago in 2004, not only failed to improve education, it worsened achievement. One strike does not produce a revolution. But the Chicago teachers dealt the "reform agenda" a blow that millions of words never achieved.

The Chicago strike also reveals the barriers to change. Although the union muted differences with the president and focused squarely on Mayor Rahm Emanuel, an unlovable bully, it was fighting against the president's agenda as much as the mayor's. The strike highlights the conflict within the Democratic party between its constituencies and its funders. The strike also revealed the new shape of the labor movement. 37 percent of government workers are unionized while compared with 6.9 percent for those in the private sector. What the teachers

were able to do may be impossible for other workers.

The first problem is the Democratic party. Progressives usually support it because the constituencies that matter to them – labor, blacks, etc. – reside there. The party was never a labor party or a social democratic party but the mixture of interests and ideology have changed over time. During the economic crises of the 1970s, Democrats lost their economic glue – the mixed economy, full employment, regulation – that had kept the party together. By the 1990s, it had embraced neoliberalism. It sought and gained support from the now dominant financial services sector. The best example of this was the appointment of Goldman Sachs' Robert Rubin, first as economic adviser and then as Secretary of Treasury in the Clinton administration. (Rubin had convinced Walter Mondale to embrace deficit reduction in the election of 1984.) President William Clinton promoted "free trade," deregulation, market solutions, and welfare reform, which solidified neoliberalism within the party. The president's task was made easier by the stunning rise in productivity during the mid-1990s, which had nothing to do with the party's new ideology or friends.

The Democrats' current difficulties after the Great Recession stem from the clash between promoting equitable growth and the party's inheritance from the Clinton years. It is not surprising that President Obama, who had no experience or interest in economic policy before he took office, listened to men like Clintonites Larry Summers and Timothy Geithner when it came to recession, trade, and banking issues.

So, the party is stuck with a tarnished neoliberalism. That is probably why President Obama's strategy is to cobble a majority from demographic slices – blacks, Hispanics, women, and youth, recently leavened with a populism generated from Mitt Romney's elitism. Given the flaws of his opponent and the GOP's miscalculation that the majority of Americans support Tea Party positions, Obama will most likely win. But such a victory does not provide a road map to fix the nation's economic problems.

Solutions depend upon the analysis of the problem. Elsewhere, I have argued that the origin of our current crisis was in the 1970s when global gluts of manufactured goods and rising oil prices pressed upon the macroeconomic ways that the U.S. produced prosperity. While Europe and Japan employed industrial policies – cartelization, government loans, and trade barriers – the U.S. downsized or exited from many tradable industries – steel, auto, machine tools.

The old jobs were replaced by new ones in real estates, retailing, finance, and defense. Virtually all (97.7 percent) new jobs created from 1980 to the Great Recession were in nontradable sectors. Most of these jobs paid less than the old ones, so inequality rose. From 1980 to 2005, which included the tech boom of the late 1990s, more than 80 percent of total increase in Americans' income went to the top 1 percent.

That is where finance entered the picture, as its role was to fill the demand gap. Nations which accumulated dollars from their trade surplus with the U.S. (especially China, Japan, and Germany) bought U.S. securities, which kept interest rates low. People could borrow to

maintain living standards and felt richer than they were as the prices of their housing assets rose. In short, consumption was maintained by increased national and household debt and asset inflation, instead of wages.

When the public's willingness to increase its debt load waned as real estate prices fell, consumption, economic activity and employment fell along with it in 2007 and 2008. There was financial misallocation and regulatory failures, the most common explanations of the crisis. But the cause was the model of globalization that produced leakage through the trade deficit and outflows of investment and manufacturing jobs offshore.

Initially, President Barack Obama seemed to understand this. Obama told CNN in September, 2009. "We can't go back to the era where the Chinese or the Germans or other countries just are selling everything to us, we're taking out a bunch of credit card debt or home equity loans, but we're not selling anything to them." Obama thus rejected the solution to the crisis of the 1970s, the postindustrialism that caused the current crisis. But the president's deeds did not match his words. He and his advisers acted as if this was a severe, but ordinary recession. Its Keynesian stimulus did nothing to alter the imbalances that caused the recession.

The recovery is weak. In 2012, the economy has five million fewer jobs than it did before the recession. Employment gains so far have been primarily in low wage occupations – retail sales, office clerks, food preparation workers, and stock clerks – nontradables. They replicate the pattern that led to the recession. From 1999 to 2007, employment growth was concentrated in the bottom third of the skill distribution. And, the future does not look much different. The Bureau of Labor Standards projects that five of the six occupations with the most job growth from 2010 to 2020 will be low wage jobs that require little or no post-high school education

The obvious source for new jobs is the tradable sector. Thus the main avenue to growth must be through reduction of the $800 billion trade deficit. Reducing it can come from a combination of importing less and exporting more. The U.S. can produce more of what it consumes and export more of what it produces. Despite talk of companies returning production to the United States, the chronic U.S. trade deficit in manufactured and high tech goods has been rising. The drivers of this deficit are Germany and China. Both nation's responses to the Great Recession were export drives (like Germany and Japan in the 1970s), which succeeded. As the fortunes of these nations show, trade policy matters.

More active responses to nations that manipulate their currency and other important trade issues require American leaders to privilege economic growth over national security issues like Iran's nuclear policy or North Korea's bluster. Increasing the tradable sector will also entail a better tax system, consumption rooted in higher wages not debt, public support of critical industries, and the requirement that companies that sell in the U.S. to also produce here. Without new growth policies, the nation faces incomplete recovery, economic stagnation, and low wage employment, conditions that plant seeds for yet another crisis.

Yet, the question remains how to get the parties to embrace new strategies for economic

growth. I come back to the Chicago teachers' strike. Historically, the labor movement has best tackled issues of jobs and inequality. But the labor movement may not be prepared to enhance private sector employment. The structural shift away from tradables produced new fissures and a new power structure within the labor movement. The rise of Andrew Stern, the head of the fastest growing labor union, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which organized non-tradable health care, public services, and property services workers, reflected this change. Stern, John Sweeney, who preceded Stern as president of SEIU before becoming head of the AFL-CIO in 1995, and Gerry McEntee, the head American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) counseled abandoning manufacturing, which could be offshored, and concentrating on the work that could not. Tensions deepened in the labor movement as Stern and others who dealt in non-tradables (James Hoffa of the Teamsters, John Wilhelm of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees [HERE], and Joseph Hansen of the United Food and Commercial Workers [UFCW]) tried to exert their influence within, then ultimately left, the AFL-CIO in 2005 to form Change to Win. The new group's mission "is to unite the 50 million American workers who work in industries that cannot be outsourced or shipped overseas into strong unions that can win them a place in the American middle class." Stern has subsequently left the labor movement, but the division within the movement lives on.

The new strategy of organizing the nontradables did not work. First, it did not halt inequality or create middle class workers. Although SEIU organized many government and service workers, its greatest success was in the arc where the AFL-CIO had succeeded – the North Atlantic and Pacific coasts. That it was not more successful in the South and Southwest than the other unions challenges the view that SEIU possessed superior organizing strategies. Second, the alleged immunity from outsourcing has become fanciful as the boundary between tradable and nontradable became porous. Third, Change to Win's abdication of the producing sector of the economy not only limits the scope of the labor movement, but ignores the important role of policy on the structure of the economy and thus the labor movement. It reinforces the notion that the current model of globalization is inevitable and gives up the weapons of social democratic politics and bargaining that can control and shape globalization.

A smaller and divided labor movement is an imperfect vehicle for change. Yet the idea of reviving American production is popular and capable of producing electoral majorities, which is why both candidates talk so much about it. And, if politics were easy, the U.S. would be in a better position than it is now.

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Progressivism, Polarization, and the 2012 Election

By | 2012: vol. 11, no. 4

Every four years, American presidential candidates seek to stir voters by claiming that "more is at stake in this election than ever before!" Every four years, they contend the voters face "stark" choices between "dramatically" different visions of America's fundamental principles and aspirations. In 2012 these histrionic tropes, while still exaggerated, are closer to being true than in most election years. Although Mitt Romney and Barack Obama are both affluent, Harvard-trained partisans of America's basic economic and political institutions and interests, they do have different significances in their world-views that have been heightened by the broader forces now driving American politics. But precisely because contentions that American voters face a momentous choice are more true than usual, those claims must be qualified by the reality that whoever gets elected is probably not only going to be unable to govern as he hopes to do. The next president may find, as Obama in his first term already found, that when it comes to some of the nation's most crucial problems, he cannot get the United States government to govern at all.

At the heart of all this is the widely documented polarization among American elites, and to a lesser degree the American public, that has been on the rise for the last four decades. This polarization is asymmetrical. It has been driven by the rise of an uncompromising culturally and economically fundamentalist New American Right. That New Right has hardly been accompanied by the emergence of an equally unflinching New American Left. Instead, on all but a few cultural issues, notably LGBT rights, the American "Left" has faded or moved more to the right in recent decades—without, however, diminishing in the slightest the New Right's portrayal of Democrats and liberals as radically socialistic, morally licentious, and deeply anti-American. But even though the polarization has not taken place equally on both ends of the American political spectrum, it is severe enough to cast into doubt whether the different sectors of the U.S. government can reach sufficient agreement even to pay the public's bills–much less to address the daunting challenges of job creation, energy generation, environmental protection, health care, pension, and social assistance reform, racial justice, infrastructure reconstruction, and educational improvement that the U.S. must resolve in the next few years, if it is not to face decades of decline.

One way to illuminate the polarized choices Americans face in 2012 is to compare them with the choices of Americans in 1912, when Republican incumbent William Howard Taft ran against Democratic nominee Woodrow Wilson, Progressive Party candidate and former Republican president Theodore Roosevelt, and Socialist Party nominee Eugene Debs. The nation was clearly sharply divided: the victorious Wilson won only 41.8% of the popular vote,

Roosevelt got 27.4%, Taft received 23.2%, and Debs 6%.

Yet in important respects, all four candidates were on one side of a divide that has since resurged and deepened in American political culture. All had been shaped by late 19th century scientific and historical views that portrayed humanity as an evolving natural species. None shared the forms of fundamentalist Christianity that denounced Darwinism as sinful error. None believed that the United States could or should any longer take its guides primarily from the doctrines of unchanging human nature and fixed natural rights that prevailed in the era of the American Revolution.

Wilson had been trained in Germanic theories of historical evolution by Herbert Baxter Adams' history and politics program at Johns Hopkins. Roosevelt had learned similar theories from John Burgess at Columbia. Taft was an undergraduate disciple of the leading American social Darwinist, William Graham Sumner, at Yale. Debs was converted to socialism in part by reading Karl Kautsky's version of Marxist historical materialism. The subsequent writings and policy positions of all four men vividly displayed these influences.

They differed sharply on some vital economic and political matters. In principle, Wilson favored the more Brandeisian, decentralizing, small business wing of Progressivism, while Roosevelt was far more enthusiastic about national power and "good" big corporations, though in office their policies diverged less widely. Like Sumner, Taft believed in a largely unregulated market as an arena for determining economic fitness and so he opposed many economic reforms that the others favored, while Debs was obviously at the opposite end of the spectrum, urging strong government measures to enable workers and farmers to triumph over capitalists. Yet Debs has rightly been interpreted more as a product of the most populist versions of American republicanism than a true Communist; Roosevelt and Taft were close enough that TR originally chose Taft as his successor; and Roosevelt and Wilson represented different parts of a Progressive movement that shared many doubts about traditional American political structures and economic policies and favored many of the same solutions. Note also that Taft, the most opposed of the four to national economic regulatory and redistributive initiatives, received less than a quarter of the vote. Instead of polarization, there was broad support among the nation's overwhelmingly white male electorate for significantly new public economic regulations and institutions. Sadly, all four candidates also accepted that their evolutionary perspectives justified beliefs in deeply entrenched inequalities in racial capacities—and among these leaders and their voters, there was broad support for the still-emerging institutions of Jim Crow segregation and black disfranchisement.

The 1912 election launched more than six decades in American politics in which major party candidates generally embraced the world-views of modern evolutionary science and the modern social sciences. They simply debated how much and which sorts of state and national market regulations and redistributive measures were effective in promoting economic growth and shared prosperity for all—with virtually everyone accepting that the policy and institutional answers in the 20th century must be different in important respects from those that prevailed at the nation's founding. And fortunately, by 1960 the nominees of both the major parties also

accepted that not only were doctrines of enduring racial inequality scientifically wrong, they and their institutionalization were political liabilities that Americans must repudiate. During most of these years, Americans with anti-evolutionary, fundamentalist beliefs largely retreated from a national political life dominated by views alien to their own. They constructed their own parallel, and thriving, churches, schools, community centers, publications and eventually broadcast networks.

But as the 1960s and 1970s proceeded, religious fundamentalists came to believe that their institutions, many of which practiced racial and gender discrimination, would be destroyed by hostile policies of an ever-more liberal and interventionist federal government. They also became increasingly outraged by what they saw as the moral declension of America into sexual licentiousness and murderous abortion policies. At the same time, the modern heirs of Taft-style economic conservatism came to feel that the expansion of governmental regulatory and redistributive powers from the Progressive through the New Deal and Great Society eras had reached truly dangerous proportions, requiring dramatic reversals. When in the 1970s Ronald Reagan began adding evangelical religious rhetoric and then fresh "supply side" arguments to his Taft-like economic conservatism, a New American Right that fused religious and pro-market economic fundamentalism into an aggressive, absolutist ideology was born. It now dominates the candidate selection process in the Republican Party.

Fast forward to 2012. It is hard to know how much Mitt Romney, who ran and governed as a far more moderate conservative in Massachusetts, really shares all the political positions that this New Right has elaborated since Reagan's 1980 triumph. It is hard to know if Romney has any settled political views at all. But many of his undoubtedly devout Mormon religious beliefs are congenial to New Right cultural and economic positions; and in any case, he won the 2012 Republican nomination only by identifying himself so strongly with those views over the preceding five years that he had few allies left who might push him in any other directions. It is in many ways ironic that the descendants of the Protestants who helped drove the Mormons to Utah and, in the case of Mitt Romney's great-grandfather, to Mexico should now form the backbone of his electoral support, reinforced by most of America's super-wealthy. But it is true that despite his Mormonsim, his Massachusetts record, and his elite secular education, Romney's general world-view, if not his specific theology, is congenial to most of the New Right that grudgingly came to deem him their best hope in 2012.

Barack Obama, in contrast, is a preeminent product and expositor of the left-leaning Progressive era pragmatism most identified with John Dewey, blended in his case with the social reform perspectives of the American black church leaders active in civil rights struggles–and tempered by Obama's Dewey-like respect for scientific "expertise" and desire to govern via deliberative, consensual, compromise-filled decision-making processes. What many Left observers miss is that, though Obama is not the foreigner, Muslim, or socialist that the Right portrays him as being, though he in fact is if anything all too solicitous of Wall Street economic concerns, the New American Right is not wrong to see him as an arch-enemy. Obama does in fact embody and advocate wholeheartedly the home-grown American world-view of egalitarian, evolutionary-minded, pro-regulatory and redistributive pragmatism that the

New Right religious and economic fundamentalists fear most, perceiving it as an all-too-potent ideology that has placed the nation on the path to cultural and economic Armageddon.

At this writing, it looks likely that Obama will win a narrow victory in 2012, aided by Romney's incautious excoriation of the "47%" of Americans that the Republican nominee, like most of the New Right, portrays as addicted to a morally and economically pathological welfare state. If so, Obama's success and subsequent policies are likely to reinforce demographic trends–especially the growth in the share of the electorate comprised by non-white, younger American voters who actually vote–that may well render the New Right incapable of winning national elections under almost any circumstances in five to ten years. In those transformations lie the hopes of all who long for a more genuine and substantial American Left in the years to come.

But even if Obama should win, and almost certainly if Romney instead gains a narrow victory, odds are that the U.S. government will remain deeply divided among polarized elites, with Tea Party-pressured Republicans in control of the House of Representatives and with more than enough of their counterparts in a Democratic-led Senate to threaten routine filibusters. In the improbable event that Republicans come to control both congressional chambers and the presidency, the Democrats are likely to play the Senate filibuster card in their turn.

Hence there is a very real chance that during the next presidential administration, the U.S. government will remain in gridlock on a wide range of vital and urgent issues—including developing an economy capable of generating enough jobs for the nation to approach full employment; strengthening protections for workers; rebuilding the country's long-decaying educational, transportation, and communications infrastructures so that its businesses can compete with fast-growing economies in other parts of the world; combating persisting and often deepening racial inequalities; and putting in place innovations that can give both the United States and the world some real hope of generating vastly more energy while reducing environmental degradation to manageable proportions. These problems are so acute that it is not clear how much of a window of opportunity the United States still has to do the many things and the big things that must be done if the rest of the 21st century is not to witness sharp declines in the quality of life, not just for most Americans, but in all likelihood for much of humanity.

It is possible, though very far from probable, that the Democrats and Obama will win more sweeping victories, first in 2012 and then in 2014, and that Obama, in his final term in public office and profoundly aware of the scale of the nation's problems, will put his attachment to compromise and consensus-building aside and push through major initiatives to address all these enormous challenges. If so, the election of 2012 will quickly and rightly be viewed as one of the handful of the most important in the history of the United States, if not indeed all modern history. But sad to say, it is far more likely that the election of 2012 will be viewed as one in which a divided American electorate faced a choice between world-views more polarized than any they had confronted in a century—and chose only to reproduce those divisions, leaving their nation a house in grave danger of no longer being able to stand.

Why Obama Will Win the Election . . . and the Left Should Hope So

By | 2012: vol. 11, no. 4

Every four years, there is a major debate within left circles as to whether or not movement leftists, often identified with various socialist perspectives, should or shouldn't participate in the election. As many perhaps correctly argue, there's not that much difference between the bourgeois parties insofar as both are bought and paid for by the capitalist elites and both parties support the same corporatist, imperialist agendas. There are many grievances the activist left has toward Obama, he continued the Iraqi war for several years, ramped up the losing war in Afghanistan, and expanded military based imperialism in Yemen, Pakistan and Somalia etc. Drones have become the "weapon of choice" in the "war on terror" in which large numbers of innocent bystanders become "collateral damage."

A constitutional lawyer gave himself the right to be the judge, jury and executioner of an accused- without any trial, without any evidence presented, or without any witnesses that can be cross examined. The Justice Department defends indefinite detention of innocent people. His massive wiretapping programs and wasteful drug wars are reprehensible. He has backtracked on marijuana reform, justice for Palestinians etc. Others note that not a single banker has paid a penalty for the many criminal acts of malfeasance that enabled the meltdown. As Glenn Ford has put it, Obama is not the "lesser of two evils, but the more effective of two evils" in that he can pursue reactionary policies that might provoke massive protests were he a Republican. For many radicals, to vote for Democrats is somewhere between ingenuous or hypocritical at best, or duplicitous at worst. Why then should the left support Obama? The answer that question will be evident from the analysis of his supporters, the actual material benefits many receive, the nature of counter hegemonic struggle, cohort flow and the contrasting moralities of political parties. There are basic differences in social and cultural issues, that have very definite consequences that impact the lives of real people.

I. Elections Have Consequences

As will be argued, if we look at the constituencies that are supporting Obama, it becomes evident why the left should be sympathetic to, indeed supportive of these struggles-even if and when the Democratic Party supports other policies the left considers onerous. Otherwise said, an election has genuine consequences and concrete impacts on the material and social conditions of vast numbers of people. The often cited serenity prayer asks for "…the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference". In an ideal world, or perhaps a less than ideal world, where a range of political parties might compete, electoral choices might include various left, socialist, and/or green

parties, some of which singularly or in coalition often actually gain power and impact national priorities and policies. In the United States however, given the well-funded duopoly of power, the best that we might hope for is space to organize, struggle and impact the political process. Most progressive changes that have taken place in the United States, advancing various aspects of the social contract, have been the result of progressive social movements, of people educating, organizing, mobilizing and applying political pressures that eventually become legislation. This has had very definite consequences and has led to actual material benefits e.g. the eight hour day, abolition of child labor, minimum wages and Social Security. The Civil Rights Act, and Medicare should also be noted. Today many people, but not enough, accept women, minorities and gays as equals and not only entitled to basic rights, but recognition/respect as dignified human beings. Many of the "victories" over struggles for civil rights, feminism, minority and gay rights could only take place after a certain masses of people, often taught by, or led by and/or influenced by various "organic intellectuals" (who typically tend to be quite progressive if not radical) had created the critiques and conditions that encourage and enabled political mobilizations from demonstrations to the creation of voting blocs, lobbying and/or supporting candidates that might foster change.

Notwithstanding the faults of the Democrats many important movements have been able to realize their goals/interests through that party and indeed, working through the political system. The election of a Republican president, beholden to both the reactionary base of Tea partiers, as well as the reactionary elites that support them, can only make progressive struggles more difficult-while millions are likely to suffer real hardships.[1] Moreover, the next president will make Supreme Court appointments that will surely hear cases dealing with Citizens United, Roe V. Wade, AHCA etc. that have major consequences. If the Tea Party influence in the House thwarted progressive legislation for two years, with two more justices like Scalia or Alito, progressive causes could be thwarted for a generation.

A. Constituencies

What are the underlying factors that impact the social and moral basis of politics? Who are the actors that support/oppose a party, candidate or agenda? Why? One of the most basic facts of modern political life is competition within the political arena where groups and/or coalitions or parties with different interests and in turn expectations of government compete for power.[2] Biology may or may not be destiny, but demographics, gender, race, age, rural-urban residency, immigrant-citizenship etc. impact elections.

1. Women: The largest and most important constituency supporting Obama consists of single women namely 1), the younger and never married, 2), divorced and 3), widowed. His lead among such groups is close to 20% easily making up for Romney's lead among men, especially white working class men and older and more affluent white men. These women have certain overlapping interests as well as more specific interests that are clearly addressed and supported by Democrats and opposed by Republicans. For the younger women, issues such as access to birth control, now available without co-pay thanks to ACA, freedom of choice, the Ur symbol of female agency (now supported by over 50% of Americans) , and the readily

availability of healthcare are salient issues. These women have more positive views of government involvement in both creating jobs and protecting women from various adversities including sexual harassment on the job. For the divorced women, especially those with young children, the availability of support for education, child care, school lunch programs and health benefits for children (vaccination programs) are important along with job creation. For the widowed, especially the retired and or near retirement, among their most important issues are the solvency and security of Social Security and Medicare programs initiated by and long supported by Democrats.[3]

2. Hispanics**:** It goes without saying that for Democrats, African-Americans are the most loyal ethnic constituency. But among the ethnic based constituencies, the largest and most important consists of the rapidly growing population of Spanish-speakers, whose origins are typically from Mexico/Central America. Bush got substantial support from the Hispanic vote. But today, for many Republicans, Mexicans immigrants became seen as a dangerous "enemy" especially since they either steal American jobs or garner huge welfare benefits – claims that are patently false. Democrats look at the Hispanic numbers and see them as voters. Obama's recent support of the "Dream Act" has given increased his support among Hispanics– save for older Cubans. (Younger Cubans are more appreciative of Obama's efforts to lower the travel barriers to Cuba. For many Hispanics the central issues include "immigrant rights" and it here that Democrats clearly hold an advantage-about 50% lead. In many swing states like Florida or New Mexico, the Hispanic vote, will determine the outcome (most polls suggest the Florida is leaning toward Obama – as a result of the Hispanic and older populations).

3. Older Americans**:** Despite media representations and Rolex ads of trim, tanned, handsome, and slightly grey haired folks stepping out of their Mercedes, most older folks have few assets and many of those over 65 live primarily on their social security and depend other Medicare for their health needs. The most recent data suggests that "in all, 25% of married couple retirees and 50% of single retirees rely on Social Security for 90% of their income. Today, 46% of Americans will die with less than $10,000 in financial assets enough to cover the funeral. (Source: CBS, Aug. 8, 2012.) Further, most people over 65 now have at least one chronic medical condition that requires continual medication and checkups. These typically include high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, perhaps loss of hearing, declining vision, etc. Serious illnesses and diseases can cost fortunes to treat. On the one hand, older voters tend to be more conservative and among the most likely to vote. Nevertheless, preliminary polling evidence suggests that notwithstanding conservative/Republican sympathies, many fear any changes to their SS/Medicare and will support Obama rather than trust a voucher system proposed as by Ryan whose selection, to mobilize the base, has turned out to be a disaster, alienating many of the older voters.

When Ryan was nominated, many Florida newspapers said Romney lost that state. The most recent polling has substantiated that prediction. As the NYT notes:

Medicare ranks as the third-most crucial issue to likely voters in Florida, Ohio and Wisconsin — behind the economy and health care, according to new Quinnipiac University/New York

Times/CBS News polls of the three swing states. The Republican proposal to retool the program a decade from now is widely disliked. Roughly 6 in 10 likely voters in each state want Medicare to continue providing health insurance to older Americans the way it does today; fewer than a third of those polled said Medicare should be changed in the future to a system in which the government gives the elderly fixed amounts of money to buy health insurance or Medicare insurance, as Mr. Romney has proposed. And Medicare is widely seen as a good value: about three-quarters of likely voters in each state said the benefits of Medicare are worth the cost to taxpayers. [4]

When Paul Ryan spoke before the AARP and mentioned the need to overturn Obama care, he was resoundingly booed.

4. Gays: The gay vote only accounts for about 8-10% of the voters, but they are an important constituency. In general they tend to be better educated, more affluent and more likely to vote and even if they only represent a small fraction of the total vote, in a close election like this one, that can determine the outcome. But there is an indirect effect as well. For a number of reasons, younger voters do not share the homophobia of their parents-Lady Gaga has told them "gays were born that way", they love, Ellen D., Lindsey L., Elton J. and respect Rosie. When Obama read the polls and saw the election would be close, he moved to support gay marriage and will likely get about 1-2% boost in votes, and in this election, every vote, straight or gay counts. And just as a majority of gays support Obama, so too do younger voters, many of whom reject the homophobia of older generations. The toleration for gays has become an important symbolic marker of toleration and respect for difference in general- and in this respect the party differences are noticeable.

5. Occupy: Occupy Wall Street, as a left populist response to the crisis of 2008 and subsequent stagnation, critical of the financial elites and the government that bailed them out, does not generally view Obama/Democrats as any different than the Republican elites. They disdain the two party system run by the 1%. Moreover, their protests and confrontations took place in the "public sphere" as they attempted to change consciousness rather than engage in electoral politics that would at best reform a corrupt system not worth reforming. Thus becomes easy to dismiss OWS playing any role in the election.[5] ***But, Occupy changed the national discussion from austerity and debt reduction to the vastly unequal wealth and power of the financial sector, the elite 1% and this favored the Democrats, despite their culpability for the crisis[6].*** While there was no direct influence of Occupy, many of their issues were embraced by the Democrats who began to talk about fairness, equality and preservation of a number of benefits from low interest college student loans, Medicare and Social Security. Occupy made it easy for the Democrats to cast Romney as an out of touch plutocrat, a vulture capitalist indifferent to most Americans. Given the numbers of their poorer minority constituencies Democrats, have been more likely to support programs that provide for benefits, job creation etc. and to position themselves as the defenders of the "middle class." As Steve Zunes (2012) put it, since Occupy:

President Barack Obama has taken on much more of a populist stance, mobilizing his

Democratic base and economically stressed independents against an opponent whom his campaign is depicting as the quintessential representative of the 1%…The fact that Obama's re-election campaign recognizes the advantage of decrying unfair tax laws and similar policies that affect middle class Americans is indicative of how the tone has shifted.[7]

Moreover, Romney, the perfect exemplar of the 1% living in splendor, paying less taxes than most, sheltering his money in the Cayman Islands has made it much easier for the Democrats to have that discussion. This was especially evident after Romney dismissed 47% of Americans who were moochers, takers and parasites. Even when he attempted to be contrite, he still referred to these people as "them" – indicating that they are truly different than those millionaires in his social circles

As Korn (2012) notes, Occupy may yet play an important despite their formal opposition to electoral politics.[8] How? Korn suggests that by acting within the Democratic Party, against its Blue Dogs and conservatives, they could have an important influence. For many Occupiers, this was the first time they were engaged in a political movement and despite the disdain toward Democrats, many are still likely to vote and vote for Obama. Why? Despite the well-deserved distrust and disdain of Obama/Democrats, a number of the Occupy people, as individuals, will still support Obama since a number of the Occupiers are still in school. And Obama promises to keep student loan programs intact and keep the interest rates low so those Occupiers still in school and/or burdened with student loans, are more likely to vote for their interests. As the young and restless join with the more established movements, labor, immigrant rights, and supply new energy and vitality to those movements, ***they will also learn that given the history of the US, there must be engagement with the political system***.

II Why Should the Left Care?

I previously noted some of the reasons why a number of progressives are not likely to support Obama. Why then support him? I will argue that 1), Democratic administrations provide more spaces for counter hegemonic "wars of position." Moreover Democratic programs that have indeed provided people with material benefits may be scaled back by Republicans. 2), As cohorts flow through time, each generation tends to embrace more liberal social values. Over time certain values move from acceptability within small, perhaps deviant minorities to an acceptable alternative for many and eventually become the new normal. Premarital sexuality was once considered evil and sinful (and among the hypocritical right it remains so), but now the vast majority of American couples cohabit before marriage – if they marry. Finally, 3), there a fundamental question of morality involved, as De Tocqueville clearly raised the question when he saw the "new nation" embracing both freedom and individualism on the one hand, and equality and democracy on the other (as seem in slavery).

A. The struggle for hegemony: For Gramsci, the ideological control of culture, hegemony, is one of the primary means through which elite classes (historic blocs) sustain their economic and political power by masking their domination and making the historically arbitrary appear as normal, natural, "common sense" that is in the best interests of all. The duopoly of political

power in the US, and the almost total colonization of consciousness by the "entertainment industries" that distract and deceive, now including electoral politics is hegemonic. Many Americans, ironically often very poor Americans, believe that supporting Republicans is actually in their interest. In much the same way, many women support very traditional notions of femininity, sexuality, and family – notwithstanding the fact that voting for conservative politicians has undermined their economic well-being and indeed subverted the idealized family for which they long.[9]

Insofar as hegemony not only mystifies class domination, but ensures that many people act contrary to their own self-interests, the "public sphere" as the site of ideological struggles over hegemony, is important. This is where the elites seek to reproduce their domination in face of various counter-hegemonic discourses, contestations and challenges. It is absolutely s crucial to maintain spaces in the where progressive groups can engage in counterhegemonic wars of position and engage in the intellectual and cultural debates, critiques and struggles over values, consciousness, identity and the desirable kind of society that would undermine ruling class hegemony. As Bill Fletcher and Carl Davidson remind us, ***the left in America is too small and fragmented to get the candidate we want.*** Even Howard Dean was too liberal for the Democratic Party. But despite the poor record of Obama, they argue, that the left should still support him since the Democratic Party is the only place where widespread serious challenges to reactionary ideologies take place.

This will be one of the most polarized and critical elections in recent history… Unfortunately what too few leftists and progressives have been prepared to accept is that the polarization is to a great extent centered on a revenge-seeking white supremacy; on race and the racial implications of the moves to the right in the US political system. It is also focused on a re-subjugation of women, harsh burdens on youth and the elderly, increased war dangers, and reaction all along the line for labor and the working class. No one on the left with any good sense should remain indifferent or stand idly by in the critical need to defeat Republicans this year.[10]

In a similar vein, Tom Hayden (2012) states

The consolidation of right-wing power would put progressives on the defensive***, shrinking any organizing space for pressuring for greater innovations in an Obama second term.*** Where, for example, would progressives be without the Voting Rights Act , programs such as Planned Parenthood, or officials like Labor Secretary Hilda Solis or EPA administrator Lisa Jackson?[11]

Together, they argue that this election should not be framed as a referendum on Obama. Rather, what is important is 1) stopping the barbarians at the gates 2), keeping what genuine gains of previous struggles e.g., Social Security, Medicare, Roe v Wade, and now AHCA, the repeal of "don't ask don't tell" or appointments of Supreme Court justices and 3), keeping alive the cultural spaces for counter hegemonic argument and debate and in turn, organization, mobilization and political impact that can advance progressive agendas.

So too today we must we go back to Gramsci. From what has been stated, electoral politics can be understood as wars of position in which progressive forces, engaged in counter hegemonic struggles prepare the cultural grounds for wars of maneuver, the actual elections as a means for gaining political power.[12] Most of these struggles, battles and wars are initially fought on the margins, on the peripheries of the social, outside the mainstreams of the political, but as they gather strength they become more visible as they move to the centers where they appear to suddenly erupt as if from out of nowhere. ***From what was noted about the constituencies supporting Obama, especially women, people of color/minorities and gays, their cultural and political power has been the result of long term, often invisible, struggles and debates, wars of position that nevertheless eventually impacted the political.*** I would argue that this strategy is what has led to genuine change—but these battles are never won, challenges remain and struggles endure. At this time in our history, progressive struggles must fight wars of position simply to keep previous accomplishments (choice, gay marriage, eliminating prayer in schools) in place that are now under assault by the right. And indeed, that is where the tradition of left social organizations and mobilizations can be most effective. In the present circumstances, the best and most realistic outcome for the progressives to stem and reverse the power of the reactionary, revanchist elements of American politics. As bad as the Democrats administration has been, a Republican presidency would be far worse for progressive social movements and might endanger the number of benefits that people do receive. Moreover, a Republican administration would most likely attempt to rescind a variety of environmental regulations, health and safety standards etc.

As Fletcher and Davidson note:

The weakness of left and progressive forces means we have been largely unable to participate, *in our own name and independent of the two party upper crust*, in most national-level elections with any hope of success. In that sense most left and progressive interventions in the electoral arena at the national level, especially at the Presidential level, are ineffective acts of symbolic opposition or simply propaganda work aimed at uniting and recruiting far smaller circles of militants. They are not aimed at a serious challenge for power but rather aim to demonstrate a point of view, or to put it more crassly, to 'fly the flag.' The electoral arena is frequently not viewed as an effective site for structural reforms or a more fundamental changing of direction.[13]

An Obama election does at least keep and maintain the spaces in the "public sphere" for debates, discussions, contestation's and indeed facilitate progressive cultural shifts over women's rights, gay rights, as well as ensure ***Supreme Court appointments that are very crucial in cultural debates over abortion, school prayer, evolution*** etc.

B. Cohort Flow: Counter hegemonic wars of position consist of educating, organizing and mobilizing that call attention to grievances, perhaps bring in new recruits and sometimes engaging in various types of direct actions – strikes, sit ins, protests etc. that might change or ameliorate certain adversities. But at the same time, many wars of position require a long

period of time for incubation and ultimately depend on cohort flow – every generation faces very different social, cultural, historical and economic realities that subsequently shape their identities and values.[14] Struggles over civil rights, feminism and even gay-rights had a very long history. And for the most part, it is been generally the younger cohorts that is been most likely to accept social changes. In this way, over time progressive struggles eventually become the new normal.

Similarly, the growing influx of immigrants and minorities over the past several decades have shifted the centers of political gravity to the left insofar as most of these groups have interests, that are economically, politically and culturally that are generally closer to Democratic agendas (constituencies of voters) than do the older, whiter, more conservative agendas more recalcitrant to multiculturalism that are more typical of the White Protestants Republicans. Much of the Republican rhetoric, couched in "polite terms", consists of racist/xenophobic "dog whistles" denigrating the growing populations of minorities. Consider only the "birther" charges about Obama, his being a "food stamp president" or is abolishing work requirements for welfare recipients as not so subtle ways of expressing racism and offering deniability that this critique is racist. Similarly the anti-immigration positions of Sheriff Joe Arpaio or Governor Jan Brewer, are decried by the Democratic Party. And consider the various expressions of Islamaphobia, the new McCarthyism, whether from Michele Bachmann, Pam Geller, John Bolton or Daniel Pipes are mainstream Republican positions.

Younger cohorts tend to be more liberal on social issues – especially over issues of race, religion, gender and/or ethnicity. They tend to be more tolerant of diversity, more likely to accept the reality of climate change and need for environmental action, and they expect the government to provide more in way of benefits to the majority, to serve the 99% rather than the 1% as is generally been the case. These have been the themes articulated by Occupy movements. Thus to repeat what has been said, the Democratic Party does provide places and spaces for these various diverse groups – many of whom have been systematically scapegoated and denigrated by Republicans.

As the population changes over time, as youth become young adults who in turn become middle-aged, there are cultural shifts in values. At certain points these changes may appear to be sudden and abrupt, for example suffrage, civil rights, feminism, the sexual revolution or gay rights. But many of these rhizomatic movements were often incubated for a very long time. Thus for example the feminism articulated by Simone de Beauvoir, itself influenced by works including Marx and Engels on the family was quite radical and in it's time mostly ignored. But with the eruption of feminism in the 60s and 70s it became part of the feminist doxa. In much the same way, if we look at the youth cohorts of today, the 18 to 30-year-olds, a number of things are perhaps clear beginning with the diminishing appeal of the Republican Party. Less than one third consider themselves Republicans. Conversely they are less supportive of the military, reluctant about imperialist intervention and in many cases, quite sympathetic with the goals and values of Occupy – even if the majority has never participated in its protests or meetings. If Occupy at least changed the national discussion from debt and austerity to any quality, fairness and social justice, we might also note that this widened the spaces for

discussions of socialism. ***What is especially important for the current argument is that salient and growing sentiment among younger cohorts is a growing critique of capitalism and almost a third of this cohort is sympathetic to socialism,*** despite the fact that very few have much of an understanding of just what socialism is other than the more generous welfare states of Scandinavia.

Those who would seek a more just, democratic, egalitarian society need to understand the means by which the structure and ideology of capital undermines a number of progressive struggles.[15] The last thing the ruling classes want is to see various progressive movements converge and jointly critique, organize and combat capital. Surely, as time moves on, growing numbers of each cohort, especially women, minorities and indeed many progressive workers are becoming increasingly aware of the adversities of capitalism and today there is more sympathetic toward socialism, various forms of cooperatives, economic democracy etc. While this may not be a significant factor in the contemporary political struggles, insofar as so many of these struggles will take place in the near future, we can expect more and more discussions of socialism among younger cohorts. But it's a long, slow struggle. Nevertheless, as I have argued, the spread of counter hegemonic discourses often dependa on cohort flow. Democratic presidencies have generally done more to advance the causes of women, minorities and immigrant populations. Not only would Republican administration thwart progress by arresting the process of cohort flow, but indeed reverse many of the victories that have been made.

Moreover, those student occupiers more likely to complete educations are more likely to become the political leaders of progressive movements in the future. Otherwise said, whatever else Occupy may accomplish, it has been an incubator for both progressive ideas and future progressive leaders that have had and will continue to have impact and consequences.[16] ***As time goes on, as they develop more political sophistication, they will come to realize the need for organization, leadership and the necessity of engaging and contesting the economic and ideological power of the 1% with counter hegemonic understandings and mobilizations.*** As distasteful as it might seem to many of the Occupiers, this can only be done through Democratic Party in so far as third parties are quite unlikely to gain power.

Parenthetically, it might also be noted that whereas the older populations are generally more conservative, given their apprehensions over cuts in either Social Security or Medicare, in many states, Obama has surged ahead of Romney among older Americans. While these older cohorts may never become the bastions of radicalism, in so far as we can expect more and more debates over guns and butter, or should we say guns versus Social Security and healthcare, we might very well expect more support from these groups for cutting military expenses and curtailing a costly and wasteful imperialism

C. Morality: Western political theory began with Plato's Republic, an inquiry into the nature of justice. To a great extent, one could argue that politics is fundamentally normative and indeed many of its great debates and issues have been concerned with the nature of what constitutes a good society. Various Enlightenment thinkers criticized dynastic rule as arbitrary, unjust, if not

tyrannical insofar as the aristocracy was little concerned with either popular will or the common good. Let them eat cake! In modern political systems, parties compete over such normative issues as what constitutes justice, what is the "good society", and how might it be achieved. The Marxist critique of capitalism can be seen as a moral critique of private property and the unbridled individualism that enabled the owners of capital to prosper and flourish while the vast majority, the workers, suffered alienation, immisseration and impoverishment. As he put it, "the free development of each depends of the free development of all". Bourgeois governments have traditionally been more likely to support the "free development" of the bourgeois classes and provide the rest with just enough crumbs to prevent revolt.

One of the most long-standing debates over the nature of American culture concerns its role in support for individual freedom or community betterment. For de Tocqueville, this was seen in the dialectical tension between individualism expressed in the commercial world, getting rich, versus the values of democracy/equality that might be seen in civic activism to benefit the community. Our contemporary business elites see the primary function of government as creating the conditions for unrestricted economic growth. This is a very different worldview from those who see the government, ***as elected by a majority,*** should represent and serve the interests of that majority, the larger community. Today, this can be seen as the expectations of support for a social contract to promote equality, recognition, dignity and grant a variety of benefits and protections, consisting of programs to ameliorate poverty, create jobs, support education, and provide for safety and healthcare, Social Security, or Medicare .

Bellah (1991) and his collaborators have long been concerned with the vision of the "good society" that has been challenged by the unbridled, Lockean individualism that has given us great wealth especially for the few, while many face unemployment, underemployment, and even hunger, homelessness, and untreated illness. We all suffer by living in a fragmented society with a decaying infrastructure and environmental degradation.[17] The logic of the market has insinuated itself within the entire society and undermined shared purpose, public virtue, collective spirit or concerns for the unfortunate-indeed the poor, minorities, immigrants and students are often seen as evil parasites – moochers and takers.[18] The "good life" has been seen in terms of freedom to pursue personal satisfactions and achievements apart from others, and the preference to retreat to one's own circle of friends and family. Indeed for many politicians and even clergy, this "freedom" from social concerns and indifference to less fortunate others is itself a virtue to be celebrated. But this indifference and/or withdrawal from the public concerns is exactly what enabled the massive corporate takeover of America and in turn its subsequent decline.

Finally, this dialectic can be seen psychologically as a fundamental difference in character structure. Although these concerns go back to the work of Wilhelm Reich on sadomasochism/authoritarianism, more recently the work of George Lakoff (2010) best captures the fundamental psychological/moral differences between the two parties. The Republicans embrace "strict father" values of toughness, competition, and individualism, it's a "tough world" out there and only the most determined individuals will succeed-success being based on the competition for the accumulation of material wealth. Conversely Democrats,

embrace the “nurturant parent” morality guided by empathy for the needs of the Other in which the government functions to provide for the care and support for all the people so that their unique creative potentials may be realized – especially those that are unemployed, retired, and the military are attending school.

The common thread of these arguments asks if the government should serve the economic elites or the rest of the society. Moreover this question is not simply one of economics, but providing recognition and dignity to various groups in the society – more specifically, as has been noted, equality and dignity, recognition for women, minorities and gays etc. As Nancy Fraser has argued, a just society must provide for both recognition and redistribution.[19] The fundamental problem, as has been argued, is that both political parties are beholden to the economic elites, and in terms of fundamental policies whether economic and geopolitical, there may not be much differences between the parties. This is this reason that many on the left will not support Obama/Democrats. But at the same time as has been argued, ***there are differences in the parties that should be noted***. This is not the lesser of two evils argument, but simply noting that the Democratic party has and does provide space where progressive agendas can be debated and realized. More specifically it is the Democratic Party that provides spaces where counter hegemonic discourses, protests and demonstrations in the public sphere can and do eventually migrate into the political and result in concrete policy changes. This was true when Social Security laws were passed, when the Civil Rights Bill was passed and today is this is evident in the support of various feminist causes especially healthcare issues, eliminating “don’t ask don’t tell” and the Affordable Healthcare Act. On the one hand these changes express a morality that privileges the collective good over individual wealth. But at the same time, these changes had very definite material impacts consider only the availability of regular healthcare versus going to the emergency room.[20]

III. **Conclusion.**

The importance of this election cannot be underestimated. From what has been said, despite the many shortcomings of the Obama administration, first and foremost, his reelection is necessary to thwart the heretofore growing power of the Tea Party, the God parties (the American Taliban), and the other Know Nothing irrationalists of today that has in fact peaked, notwithstanding the largess of the right wing elites. Given both demographic changes and increasingly liberal cohorts undermine their agendas. There’s just not enough angry white men left to elect a president. A resounding defeat of Romney will force Republicans to rethink the value of reactionary conservatism. Will they reject the tea party extremism, or simply remain a regional, Southern/Mountain political power?

Romney’s embrace of the reactionary tea party agenda may have been necessary for him to get the nomination, but on the way, he alienated vast numbers of women, minorities, gays, the elderly (especially with the selection of Paul Ryan) and independent voters. By all indications, evangelical fundamentalism, patriarchy, racism/xenophobia and scapegoating, homophobia and the retrenchments of social benefits are losing their purchase in electoral politics. Young voters are little swayed by such appeals and indeed many are turned off by that strategy. Atheists,

agnostics and pagans are the rapidly growing denomination; they are now the third largest denomination after Catholics and Southern Baptists. The good news is that however slowly, ***the progressive agenda is moving forward***. And it is for that reason, that the future promises to be an especially ripe moment to advance counter hegemonic struggles. While in the near future such struggles are likely to remain separate, they're all foregrounded by the crisis of capitalism. It is for this reason that the left needs to seize the moment and prepare for a time in which a number of counter hegemonic social movements can converge and jointly challenge the very nature of capitalism. Surely Republican victory would set many of these struggles back and would require the left to refight old battles that had been won.

As has been argued, this is an extremely important election with implications for several decades. On the one hand, it is absolutely necessary thwart and indeed begin to reverse the power of the reactionary elites, and the Tea Party extremists. But at the same time, this must be seen as one moment of a number of progressive struggles over equality, dignity and recognition for the heretofore excluded and marginalized, as well as insure that government provides material benefits from income support to healthcare for its citizens. It is absolutely crucial that these struggles take place at this time in so far as they become part of the historical context that shapes the identities, values and ideologies of the present cohort of youth. After the 2008 election, many of the young people who supported Obama were disappointed by his policies, broken promise and became disenchanted with political engagement. This is indeed unfortunate and fails to recognize that despite the corporatist/imperialist agendas that seem paramount, below the surface, and indeed often the more peripheral sites of the public sphere, a number of counter hegemonic struggles are taking place that promise a more progressive future. At this historical moment is evident throughout the world, whether in Egypt or Tunisia, Québec or Chile, Greece or Spain, that young people are playing a crucial role in struggles against injustice and inequality. It becomes incumbent upon the American left to not only support and encourage our own domestic struggles. As Occupy matures, it will surely learn that it must move from occupations, marches and demonstrations to political organizing and exerting pressures within the political system. The left must support the emerging, progressive cohorts that can hopefully reset the national agendas and restore a progressive tradition that many have forgotten. And this is more easily done in a Democratic administration

Finally, as has been argued, the ultimate goal of various counter hegemonic struggles, is moral, how do we achieve a society that that is fair, just, and democratic? It is of course quite evident how the economic power of the elites has influenced the power of government, through supporting "friendly" candidates as well as commanding a small army of lobbyists. Thus as has been evident, we live in a society that is neither fair, nor just nor democratic. Moreover, this reality has been sustained by a valorization of the role of the individual and his/her freedom which is ultimately economic freedom. As Tocqueville first noted this freedom of the individual was at odds with democracy and equality. How do we challenge the morality of individual freedom and instead privilege democracy and equality. As I have argued this can only take place through struggle and essential part of that struggle rests on influencing young people. It is for such reasons that whatever the many faults of the second Obama term may be, a

Democratic administration does provide more space for various progressive struggles for the equality, dignity and recognition of all. Nor let us forget, that for many of our citizens, especially the poor, the young and the old that dignity includes various material benefits gained through struggles.

Notes

[1] As Joshua Holland recently noted, recent research into the psychology of politics helps us understand why most people cannot see the actual impact of government policies-cutting taxes and spending sounds good, but these cuts include income support, medical care etc. that can mean starvation, malnutrition, illness and death.

https://truth-out.org/news/item/11129-the-conservative-psyche-how-ordinary-people-come-to-embrace-paul-ryans-cruelty

[2] This of course does not assume that interests may necessarily be rational; pursuing one set of interests for example a pro-life agenda may very well support candidates and policies that undermine their economic interests. This is of course the fundamental meaning of hegemony in which, as Gramsci demonstrated, is how a ruling bloc gains and/or maintains its domination through the control of cultural values. Thus when Italian workers rejected unions – as the Church demanded – they undermined a progressive agenda and improving their own life conditions. Thomas Frank said much the same about Kansas; they voted for pro-life candidates and lost jobs. Working class whites who believed Blacks were both taking their jobs away and squandering their taxes moved to the Republican party. And look what that got them. Frank, Thomas, 2004 *What's the Matter with Kansas,* New York, NY: A Metropolitan/Holt Paperbacks Book

[3] It is often said that Social Security is the third rail of American politics and any politician who dares to change that program will lose.

[4]
https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/23/us/politics/polls-say-medicare-is-key-issue-in-3-swing-states.html?pagewanted=all

[5] As Fran Piven Fox reminded us, Occupy has barely begun, social movements typically take years if not decades to become powerful actors, and eventually they will need to confront political power. See:
https://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/17/occupy-protest-not-over

[6] It was Clinton who pushed for the repeal of Glass-Steagall that was a precondition for the subsequent meltdown.

[7] https://www.cnn.com/2012/09/17/opinion/zunes-occupy-movement/index.html?hpt=hp_c1

[8] https://www.huffingtonpost.com/pearl-korn/occupy-movement-upcoming-election_b_1801492.html

[9] It is well known that conservative, Red states tend to be more poor, and higher divorce rates, greater family violence, sexual abuse, and out of wedlock pregnancies. But Republicans have been able to convince many whites that their adversities are due to Democratic largess to African Americans

[10] https://www.alternet.org/election-2012/2012-elections-have-little-do-obamas-record-which-why-we-are-voting-him?akid=9203.1088490.wqLX2v&rd=1&src=newsletter691462&t=10&paging=off

[11] https://tomhayden.com/home/saving-obama-saving-ourselves.html

[12] This is not to ignore the economic power that controls the political, but the only way that can never be transformed is through massive political mobilizations. But we already know that opposition citizens United is growing and whatever else might be said, the success of such movements will depend on mobilizing political pressures.

[13] https://www.alternet.org/election-2012/2012-elections-have-little-do-obamas-record-which-why-we-are-voting-him?paging=off

[14] See Karl Mannheim, *The Problem of Generations,* https://mediaspace.newmuseum.org/ytjpressmaterials/PDFS/ARTICLES_ABOUT_THE_GENERATION/01_The_Sociological_Problem.pdf

[15] Whatever else Occupy may have done, they made critique of capitalist political economy a central aspect of their mobilization. Nevertheless, their reluctance to directly engage the political blunted the power of that critique.

[16] https://www.huffingtonpost.com/pearl-korn/occupy-movement-upcoming-election_b_1801492.ht

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[17] Bellah, Robert. (1991) *The Good Society,* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc

[18] Lukacs showed how the very categories of thought of bourgeois society were themselves reification's that masked class consciousness and the possibility of transcendence.

[19] Fraser, Nancy, 1997 *Justice Interruptus*. New York: Routledge;

[20] And the unseen elephant in the room is the looming environmental and/or resource crises

How to Kill a Vampire

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The Republican Party has dominated American politics for more than three decades. It strode into power as the muscular guardian of white privilege, moral authority, efficient markets, male power, and military strength, but it wasn't long before its central project came into view. The past thirty years have been a testament to its success: the right has overseen the most dramatic upward transfer of wealth and power in American history. Its assault on living standards has risen to new levels of intensity, afflicts tens of millions of families from almost all social classes, and has driven the political system to the point of collapse. The United States now enjoys the distinction of being the most unequal OECD country on the planet, with levels of inequality and social distress that mirror those of many overt plutocracies. Millions of us are feeling the effects of an historic offensive by capital that has been reshaping the country's life for a generation.

The GOP's long run has rested on its use of American antistatism to craft a powerful attack on social welfare. But its hostility to Washington is a selective matter. It hasn't led to reduced funding for the military, the FBI, federal prisons, or other elements of the state's repressive apparatus. But it has led to regressive taxes, fewer regulations, and more privatization – all accomplished through the aggressive use of political power. That's because the right's core project is not defending liberty, or cutting back on intrusive bureaucrats, or unleashing the power of entrepreneurs. It's using state power so capital can organize as many areas of life as possible.

It is imperative that this era be brought to an end. To do so, the left must articulate two core positions: first, that there are fundamental areas of social life that should not be organized by market forces at all. The second is that even in those areas that are commodified, capital's range of action has to be strictly limited. The central principle that gives life to both of these positions is the requirement that capital be regulated in the service of social goals that are higher, and more compelling, than private profit.

The bitter divisions that now paralyze the political system are signs that the right's hegemony is coming under serious strain. As the Tea Party's tail continues to wag the GOP's dog, the Republicans can do little more than cling to the same slogans that swept them into power a generation ago. Their ideological rigidity and stubborn fidelity to the programs that have brought ruin to so many might be signs that a new political regime is taking shape. These periods of transition carry within them confusing currents and contradictory impulses that usually manifest themselves most violently in the ranks of the dominant party. But right-wingers aren't the only ones who are disoriented. Given the enormity of the stakes, theoretical clarity and historical understanding are essential.

The level of inequality is breathtaking and, thanks to the Occupy movement of blessed memory, has begun to percolate into the country's political consciousness. It confirms what many families know from their own lived experience: the past thirty years have seen stagnation or decline for the vast majority of Americans and stupendous gains by a tiny minority. Since 1985, the lower 60% of U.S. households has lost more than $4 trillion, almost all of which has gone to the richest 5% of the population. This has accompanied the general decline in living standards that can no longer be described simply in terms of dollars and cents but has spilled over to many areas of life. Collapsing public education systems, rising personal and family debt, fewer employment benefits, shorter vacations, suffocating levels of anxiety, lower real wages, stagnating upward mobility, an "obesity epidemic," the world's highest rate of incarceration – all these familiar problems are signs that economic inequality has precipitated a general social crisis. To take just one example, consider the implications of the fact that there are precisely four countries in the world that do not have a national policy of paid leave for new parents: Swaziland, Papua New Guinea, Liberia, and – you guessed it – the United States, where fewer than half a dozen states offer paid leave. The economy has become a zero-sum game; it's simply no longer the case that "a rising tide lifts all boats," as John F. Kennedy famously observed. The staggering wealth at the top has been taken from everyone else.

None of this should be particularly surprising, especially since it's been known for some time that market processes tend to channel wealth and power to those who already have both. Unregulated markets are unstable and destructive, and it doesn't take a very sophisticated understanding of history to grasp how important it is to mitigate the damage they inflict. Societies have sought to protect themselves in a variety of ways, from momentary explosions of popular anger and attempts to build institutions to more comprehensive measures of supervision. Indeed, the most successful period of recent American history – the thirty-year Keynesian "golden age"—featured a bipartisan agreement that broad prosperity required active governmental planning, regulation, and redistribution. The middle-class consumers' republic that was built in the post-World War II era was hobbled by racism, sexism and lots more, but it did stabilize a capitalist order that was undergirded by a relatively egalitarian distribution of wealth and a set of public and private institutions that provided an important measure of social security.

The consensus that made all this possible began to unravel with Keynesianism's failure to resolve the stagflation that ruined Jimmy Carter and ushered in the long presidency of Ronald Reagan. Social disintegration has accelerated in recent years, fed by the political consequences of accelerating inequality and a relentless attack on social welfare that would have made even Reagan blanch. Margaret Thatcher's infamous 1987 claim that "there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families" was a characteristically brutal assault on the fundamental proposition of the modern welfare state and now appears to have been an opening shot in capital's long offensive – a shot which, it should be noted, was fired from 10 Downing Street, not from the headquarters of some bank or mining company. Recent developments have clarified matters in this country as well, laying bare the political root of the current crisis but also containing the hints of its political resolution.

Economic forces like technology, globalization, “flatness,” skill shifts,” and the “education premium” have certainly contributed to the unprecedented level of American inequality. But far too many journalists, pundits and economists overstate their importance because they ignore the politics of the problem. After all, the same economic forces are at work in other countries; if anything, they have more impact in economies that are more exposed to the international system than we are. But most of them have taken steps to protect their societies from the forces that have been ravaging American life. Indeed, the only countries that have permitted inequality to tear at the social fabric and damage the lives of so many people are those, like the United Kingdom, that have marched in lockstep with us. The crucial difference between those countries that have managed to protect their populations’ standard of living and those that haven’t can be found in differences in government policy. With all their tribulations, the European social democracies are still the most successful societies on the planet.

The contemporary Republican Party is the most right-wing national political formation of the past hundred years. Based in the South and driven by the resentments of its white, male, petty-bourgeois electoral base, it has consolidated its role as the unabashed servant of wealth and is the major institutional barrier to any efforts to mitigate the whip of the market. Its tripartite mantra of regressive taxes, deregulation and privatization summarizes its bitter resistance to any policy that would subject capital to democratic supervision. Its willingness to inflict pain on a broad swath of the population makes it unique among broad Western parties, but the problem is much bigger than what’s happened to the GOP. As it has rushed rightward over the past thirty years, the Democrats have drifted in the same direction. But there are still significant differences between them, and those differences matter. The Democrats remain the party of government and a measure of downward redistribution, while the GOP is happy to deploy state power in the interests of wealth. The result is a situation where the national legislature has earned historic levels of scorn and contempt. Unprecedented levels of partisanship and ideological cohesion have paralyzed a Congress that now stands as the talking-shop of a political class whose incompetence is matched only by the magnitude of the tasks it is unable to face.

It’s no longer a matter of the poor versus the rich. Economic inequality, political paralysis and ideological confusion threaten the livelihoods of tens of millions of beleaguered middle-class families. Faced with a decline in their standard of living and their hopes for their children, many voters are approaching the 2012 presidential election with a volatile mixture of rage, disappointment and cynicism. The basic political imperative of our time – the absolute necessity to impose measures of social regulation on economic processes – has been obscured by Republican brutality and Democratic unwillingness to call a spade a spade.

Inequality should never have been allowed to develop to this point, but national elections can sometimes illuminate fundamental principles. It’s a measure of the crisis we face that this illumination will not come from either of the two major parties. Just as capital can be disciplined only from outside the logic of the marketplace, so theoretical clarity and practical guidance will come only from outside the logic of the party system. There’s nothing new about this; all the waves of reform that have worked to civilize American capitalism originated from

outside the formal structures of party politics. Marx's description of capital as a "vampire" driven by unquenchable blood-lust stands as a brilliant anticipation of contemporary anxieties and popular culture. More importantly, it's a guide to action.

There aren't enough wooden daggers or silver crucifixes lying around to kill off this particular member of the Undead yet, but legend has it that sunlight is a powerful, renewable and widely-available poison. And, thanks to the long history of the labor movement and the work of left-wing theorists, we already know the basic principle that can shed light on our situation. It's the core of what Marx famously called the "political economy of the working class," and he expressed it with his usual clarity when describing the victory of the Ten Hours' Bill in England. After summarizing the hysterical claims of British industrialists that any restriction of their control over their workers' hours would ruin the entire economy and undermine the foundations of civilization, he articulated the principle with elegant simplicity in his Inaugural Address to the First International: "social production controlled by social foresight."

We won't be able to organize this for a long time, but the breadth and comprehensiveness of political affairs allows us to raise general issues that look beyond the boundaries of the disastrous present. Above all, we have to have the courage of our convictions. This means more regulation, not less; more centralization, not less; more progressive taxation, not less; more bureaucracy, not less; more state, not less. It's a measure of American backwardness and the left's impotence that this elementary matter is even on the table.

No one else can talk like this. The Republican Party is the organized face of capitalist brutality and reaction. The Democrats – the "second-most enthusiastic capitalist party in the world," in Kevin Phillips's apt description – are too compromised and intimidated to articulate the principles of meaningful reform with any consistency. And the Occupiers, whose great accomplishment was to raise the issue of inequality in a morally unassailable way, are fast becoming irrelevant because of their resistance to politics, their indifference to theory, and their refusal to learn the lessons of history.

The immediate question is how to relate to the Democratic Party generally, and to President Obama in particular. Many on the left are fond of saying how "disappointed" they are in the way the administration handled the bank bailout, the criminality of its predecessor, the health care debate, the war in Afghanistan, and a host of other issues. And there's plenty to be disappointed about, although one should always be careful about how far one wants to run with one's disappointment.

Part of the problem stems from the left's inability to understand the Democratic Party. Treating FDR and the New Deal as the standard from which to assess the reformist bona fides of this or that figure runs the risk of treating a rare moment as a normal one. The Democrats are the home of whatever reformist impulse can still be found in the two-party system, but we should be careful about being overly enthusiastic. Many of us had elevated hopes about what was possible in the aftermath of the Bush years. Economic crisis seemed to offer the opportunity to change things in a radical way, and Rahm Emanuel's widely-reported observation that one

should not let a good crisis go to waste allowed us to indulge our hopes that Obama would lead the country to a radical rejection of Reaganism. Things didn't turn out as many of us wanted, but it's not clear whether the new administration's caution and the GOP's unanimous resistance were more important than our own impatience. Subjectivism and over-enthusiasm are no substitutes for a sober assessment of a given situation and a clear-eyed understanding of its possibilities. To take a prominent example, it was never realistic to expect the President to allow the global financial system to explode – or even to preside over a series of measured failures that would have led to its radical restructuring. Sandy Weill, the former president of Citigroup and one of the principal architects of the financial goliaths that have brought the world to its knees, has now found religion and wants to break up the big banks. It's a wonderful opportunity to engage our cynicism as we hear him want to renew the Glass-Steagall Act that he did so much to destroy, but let's not forget how far things have moved from the first few months of the Obama presidency.

There was no realistic alternative to the bank bailout, but that doesn't mean that the administration has to be supported root and branch. It could have fired the management of all banks that took TARP money, imposed haircuts on some of the debt, and wiped out the bank shareholders. Obama deserves serious criticism for his refusal to punish the banks for their destructive recklessness – a refusal that will surely come back to haunt us. The task is to formulate a responsible criticism that looks beyond what the Democrats are able to offer and still makes sense. This requires a level of maturity that's difficult to find when impatience and disappointment rule the day.

Health care reform is a perfect case in point. The Affordable Health Care Act is a lot of things rolled into one. Some of the left-wing critiques are valid, important and necessary. The act delivers millions of new customers to the private insurance companies and preserves the central role of profit in the delivery of health care. It moved forward because the Democrats bribed Big Pharma. The administration never tried to banish capital from the health care industry, never seriously pursued the possibility of "Medicare for all" or even the relatively weak "public option." For those of us who really did want a "government takeover" of health care, Obama's caution sounded a lot like capitulation. So a lot of us were "disappointed" in the outcome of the whole effort.

The ACA falls short of our dreams, but the Republicans really hate it because it directly attacks everything the modern Right stands for. The Act organizes the single biggest downward redistribution of wealth in a generation. It enlists the power of the state to eliminate one of the most disgraceful elements of American inequality: the inability of many people to afford medical care after they leave a job or get sick. And it does so in large measure by taxing the rich, cutting Medicare subsidies for private insurers, and channeling most of its benefits and subsidies to households making less than four times the poverty level. It organizes important and unprecedented benefits for 47 million American women, offering a wide range of preventive services with no co-pays or deductibles. It stands as a rejoinder to Dame Thatcher, affirming the central role of mutual responsibility and solidarity – even if it's organized through private insurance. None of this requires our uncritical praise, but surely the Right's hatred

ought to count for more than our disappointment.

Part of the problem is that the left has been so isolated and powerless for so long that we don't know what to do except complain. The only two Democratic presidents during the Age of Reagan – Clinton and Obama – came under sustained leftist criticism, but we really need to examine our expectations along with their failings. Clinton, arguably the most successful politician of his generation, managed to defeat some of the more rabid elements of the congressional Right. His was a rearguard action, but it protected Medicare and Medicaid, oversaw the lowest Black and Latino unemployment rates in American history, and implemented a series of redistributive measures over bitter Republican opposition. The Bush presidency made any real improvements impossible, and the Obama administration has been hobbled by unremitting hostility and resistance from the Right. But the old adage remains true: it is the left's responsibility to fight for the most wide-ranging and substantive democratization of social life. This means articulating and advancing the "political economy of labor," the core of which is the social regulation of capital. This task is immeasurably easier with a Democratic president than a Republican.

Supporting Obama's reelection doesn't mean tailing behind him or the Democratic Party. Political independence means advancing programs that go beyond what they can accommodate. Elementary political maturity certainly requires us to be careful about what "beyond" means. The really important thing, though, is that all of this is infinitely easier with an administration that is already committed to mitigating inequality. The fight for "Medicare for all" that finally eliminates the private insurers, for example, will surely be an important step on the road to building a society whose wealth would benefit all. Current law allows for local initiatives in this direction. The process is well under way in Vermont and is starting to develop in other places, powered by years of organization and pushed forward by patients, providers, experts, activists and others who recognize how disastrous it has been allow private insurers to organize the country's healthcare system. After years of grass-roots organizing, proponents of a single-payer system finally prevailed in the state legislature and helped elect a favorable governor. This struggle hasn't been embraced by the national Democratic Party, is often opposed by organized labor and has not been supported by the Obama administration – but it hasn't encountered the uncompromising opposition that one would expect from Romney and the Republicans. The ACA enables Vermont to wage a struggle that has implications for tens of millions of people around the country. It is morally impermissible for the left to oppose a measure that will dramatically improve the fortunes of so many people. The political economy of capital has met its match in the political economy of labor for the moment, but the final outcome of this local fight depends in no small part on what happens in Washington.

This is why the left has to actively support Obama's reelection. The Republicans' capacity, and their demonstrated willingness, to inflict real misery is reason enough. There's no arguing with them, no compromising with them, no bipartisanship possible with them. Obama has never seemed to understand just how intractable the opposition is, how barbaric it's willing to be, and how important it is that it be destroyed. But there's more at stake than Obama's mistaken hope that he can compromise with animals. A national administration that is committed to

defending the welfare state creates room to fight for expanding the social protections that have been under assault for a generation. In a country where the most basic propositions of civilized life are up for grabs, this is no small matter. We are not numerous enough, not organized enough, not coherent enough, and not united enough to have a significant effect on national affairs. It will be some time before we are. That will depend on a lot of things – one of which is how clear we are in articulating the political economy of labor in a way that makes sense. And here's the thing: only we can do it.

The King of the 1% v. The American Republic

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When Barack Obama was elected President in 2008, at the start of the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression, like many people I was elated. At the time it seemed that the Republican Party, with its aggrandizement of economic elites and undisguised deployment of arbitrary power, had been completely discredited. In light of the shenanigans of Wall Street and the mess in Iraq, the Democrats were able to take control of the Presidency and both houses of Congress – and then they botched it. The election of 2010 ushered in a new wave of right-wing recklessness and now some of our most cherished principles and programs are at serious risk.

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While the Republicans are primarily to blame for the economic situation we currently face – for causing it, for refusing to work with the Democrats on solutions, and for advocating policies that will make things worse – over the past four years, I have also blamed Obama. Like many on the Left, I am disappointed with Obama's job performance during his first term for an array of reasons. The stimulus was too small and was undermined by his budget cuts. He took single payer off the table before even beginning negotiations and then failed to fight for the public option. And he capitulated way too much to Republicans during the manufactured "debt crisis," instead of explaining why you should not try to balance the budget during a recession. For me, the problem is not that Obama was unable to get a progressive agenda passed; it was that in many cases, he never even tried. Instead, he often seemed to have a pathological desire to pander to the right, even in the face of their professed desire to destroy him. And, strangely, he seems to have little understanding of Keynesian economics.

Even more problematic, however, are some of the policies Obama has actively pursued. I am still angry about his refusal to hold Bush Administration officials responsible for the war crimes they committed and outraged at his continuation of many of Bush-era tactics in the so-called War on Terror. After four years, we are still at war in Afghanistan, we are still illegally imprisoning people in Guantanamo Bay, and we are now assassinating people, including American citizens, with drones.

Yet despite these significant short-comings, I would argue that progressives should strongly support Obama in the 2012 election because what we are facing from the Republicans is a monumental attack on the fundamental principles that underlie not only progressive politics

but also democratic self-government itself. Indeed, this year the Republican Party called into question principles and programs that most people probably thought were completely secure. With their fabricated invocation of voter fraud, the GOP has launched a major attack on universal suffrage, attempting to systematically disenfranchise minorities. With the Republican "war on women," they have introduced a shocking array of misogynist agenda items into the political discourse – voting against equal pay for equal work, standing opposed to contraception, cutting women's health programs, advocating for vaginal probes, and suggesting that "legitimate rape" cannot result in pregnancy – all of which undermine the human dignity of women and erode gender equality. In addition, the Republicans in general and Romney/Ryan in particular have stated their desire to privatize essentially all public institutions and programs, which will destroy what remains of the commons and result in the further immiseration of the American people. Finally, the Right seeks to exacerbate the already extreme level of economic inequality that threatens the very existence of the middle class, which has been seen, from Aristotle through contemporary political economy, as the necessary foundation for democratic self-government.

The right-wing agenda is outrageous, but it is not enough to simply react to it piece by piece. What progressives need is an overarching vision that has wide appeal. The basic principles that should animate left-wing discourse and activity are the same today as they have always been, but they need to be integrated into a coherent vision, rather than simply arising ad hoc. Personally, I favor framing progressive principles in terms of American republicanism, because that tradition is recognized as legitimate by most Americans, since it was a founding tradition of our country. Consequently, using a republican frame for progressive ideals demonstrates that we are not attempting to impose a "foreign" discourse on the United States – like "European socialism" or "Kenyan anti-colonialism." Instead, we are appealing to the best of our own tradition of democratic republicanism.

You don't often hear progressives lay claim to American republicanism. While the Right makes frequent reference to the founding, most often their depiction is either needlessly narrow (as illustrated by the Tea Party) or downright erroneous (as when Glen Beck invokes Tom Paine). Instead of letting these distortions lie, it is my contention that American progressives should actively reclaim the political philosophy of republicanism and clearly articulate its radical implications. Republicanism is not alien to the Left. Indeed, Marx and Engels considered themselves the legitimate heirs of the republican legacy of the French Revolution and used its principles to espouse social democracy, as did the "economic republicans" of nineteenth-century America.

Because republicanism constitutes America's heritage, it provides a narrative that ordinary people can latch onto. However, it is important to note that my invocation of republicanism involves teasing out its fundamental principles and applying them in a way appropriate for contemporary times, not trying to resuscitate outmoded or exclusionary interpretations from the past. Republicanism, in its essence, presents an array of important political principles. It constitutes a political philosophy that is equally committed to both *popular sovereignty* and the *rule of law*. These principles are important because together they help protect *liberty* for the

republic and its people. Popular sovereignty means that ordinary people, rather than just elites, should participate in passing laws and setting public policy, and elected representatives must remain accountable to the people, all of which helps prevent tyranny. The rule of law protects people from arbitrary power, whether stemming from the government or from other members of society. Moreover, as a form of collective self-government, republicanism aims at the *common good*, not just the advancement of particular individual interests.

Equality is absolutely central to the maintenance of republican self-government for multiple reasons. First, the concept of popular sovereignty is based on political equality, currently actualized through universal suffrage. Second, the rule of law requires equality before the law, regardless of wealth, status, race, or other particulars. Third, now that women are recognized as citizens, the republican tradition must recognize gender equality as a fundamental principle. Finally, republicanism requires a certain level of economic equality because high levels of inequality erode solidarity and reciprocity, which form the basis of *public-spiritedness*, also known as civic virtue. In the American context, while the imperative of economic equality, problematically, underwrote the original property requirement for voting, it subsequently led to policies designed to prevent the emergence of a new aristocracy, including the inheritance tax and progressive taxation. In other words, while republican principles have been implemented in different ways in different historical eras, the basic principles remain the same and continue to be useful for us today, and the republican frame allows us to appeal to values most Americans accept as legitimate, even if they are not students of political theory.

The issue of extreme economic inequality has come to the fore in the 2012 election, partly due to the intervention of the Occupy movement. As both Obama and Romney have asserted, this election really does pit two diametrically opposed philosophies against each other. Whoever originally said Romney wants to be “King of the 1%” has it exactly right. The phrase nicely encapsulates the dual threat presented by the Republican ticket. “1%” refers to the interests of economic elites that stand opposed to the common good, while “King” signifies arbitrary power. Augmenting the arbitrary power of elites directly undermines the republican tradition of democratic self-government, which is based on popular sovereignty and the rule of law. And since the Republicans have made it a priority to attack universal suffrage, the backbone of contemporary democracy, calling the Republicans anti-democratic cannot be dismissed as hyperbole.

There has been a lot of excellent commentary criticizing the extreme inequality that pervades our society. Very often these critiques focus on basic fairness, which is compelling. But I would like to see more attention to the ways in which the creation of two polarized classes undermines the possibility of working together to pursue the common good, which is what republican self-government requires. That is to say, if two diametrically opposed interests are allowed to develop, and no common interest exists, there is little chance of cooperation, and society can fracture. We need to maintain some commonality among the people, so we have an interest in working together for the common good. Collectivism is not a foreign concept. Republicanism is a theory of collective self-government. It attends to what we share in common. Indeed, *res publica* means public thing.

What we also don't hear enough about in today's political discourse is the concept of arbitrary power. The political institutions of this country were created to constrain the arbitrary power of government, to fracture large concentrations of political power. Casting governmental overreach – in foreign as well as domestic realms – in terms of arbitrary power connects the critique to our shared republican heritage and frees it from the standard libertarian framing. In addition, however, we also need to pay attention to the arbitrary power of economic elites, to large concentrations of economic power. This terminology recasts the concept of class struggle in republican terms.

Thinking in terms of republican principles, we can see that while Obama could have been more effective in advocating for a progressive agenda – and the Left could have been more effective in demanding that he do so – clearly the President stands opposed to the destruction of self-government and the plundering of the commons by elites. While his healthcare plan leaves something to be desired, his professed goal is the common good of universal healthcare. While I found it outrageous that Obama would put Social Security and Medicare on the table during the manufactured "debt crisis" negotiations with Boehner, the President does not contest the very existence of a public institutions. And while Obama clearly violates the basic tenets of republicanism when he shamelessly exercises arbitrary power in the military realm, he is so much better than Romney in terms of most other important issues that he is worthy of our support. In any event, a vote for Obama pushes us further towards a vision of Left republicanism, than does a vote for Romney, and the risks to all we hold dear as a country are much too great to justify a protest vote in 2012. That is why I am voting for Obama and the Democratic ticket on November 6.

Labor’s Quadrennial Condition: Between A Rock and A Hard Place

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In the Fall of 2012, U.S. unions found themselves, per usual, caught between a scary Republican rock and a dreary Democratic hard place. Regardless of whether Mitt Romney or Barack Obama wins the presidential election, the period ahead will be very difficult for workers and their organizations. If the Romney-Ryan ticket wins, labor faces a swift return to the unbridled union-bashing and ruinously pro-corporate policies of the George W. Bush era. Yet, after four years of Obama’s “change you can believe in,” you have to be a magical thinker to believe that labor’s salvation will be assured by the president’s re-election.

In the top officialdom and activist layer of local unions, labor boosterism for Obama abounds nevertheless. Organized labor has always acted as if “lesser evilism” was an insufficient basis for rallying workers at election time. So instead of acknowledging the shortcomings of Obama and the Democrats—which disappointed union officials have been pointing out to the rank-and-file since 2009—national unions are undermining their own credibility (as they do every four years) with inflated claims for their endorsed presidential candidate.

As labor left activists Michael Hirsch and Jason Schulman noted recently in Jacobin, “the line taken by the AFL-CIO today is that the November election poses a choice between two economic worldviews. Would that be true. The real sub-text is: ‘Vote Obama: He’ll screw us less.’ ”

A Friend In Need?

During the president’s first term, quite a few union dues-payers noticed that their pleas for help fell on deaf ears among labor’s supposed friends in Washington and many state capitols. Since 2009, major differences between Democratic and Republican Party positions on free trade, labor and the economy, corporate power, war and peace, civil liberties, and environmental protection have in reality (if not rhetoric), become harder to detect. This year, as many reporters have noted, Obama’s re-election has become, for the president, almost an end in itself; rarely do voters hear any appeal from the White House to elect more Democrats to the House and Senate, despite Congressional majorities (and, in the Senate, a “super-majority”) being a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for implementing the party’s putative platform (including it’s watered-down labor planks).

So now, if the past is prologue, four more years of Obama’s “bi-partisan” approach will be no less problematic for labor. The president’s second term agenda may even include a lame-duck

tilt toward greater austerity, in the name of “deficit reduction” and “entitlement reform.” (For more on that happening, sooner rather than later, see https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/24/obama-and-social-security_n_1910498.html?utm_hp_ref=politics. If this scenario unfolds, labor’s strategy of clinging desperately to the coat-tails of the Democratic Party, will not feel much different, to many union members, than getting kicked to the curb directly by the GOP. It will be increasingly hard to distinguish between the Democrats’ disinterest in collective bargaining and the Republicans’ active hostility to it, between Obama’s professed support for Social Security and Medicare and GOP determination to privatize both programs.

In short, whatever the Electoral College outcome in November, U.S. unions will get little respite from their many defensive battles of the last three decades. On the left, during this painful period of retreat and defeat, the generally agreed-upon formula for turning the tide in this one-sided class war has been a “to-do” list more easily recited than implemented. In some combination or fashion, most labor leftists agree that unions should do more systematic and radical membership education, become internally democratic, engage in direct action on the job, organize the unorganized (particularly foreign-born workers), build cross-border solidarity, and get involved in broader community-labor alliances leading to greater independence from mainstream politics.

The Wall Street Meltdown

Now, if this was a simple recipe to follow, there would have been far more U.S. union transformation than we’ve seen so far. Instead, thousands of dedicated labor activists have toiled diligently, for years, to change their own small (or larger) corner of the “house of labor,” while myriad private and now public sector enemies have tried to demolish the whole shaky structure. Many labor-management stand-offs have slowed the overall process of union marginalization, locally or regionally, but not reversed it overall.

While making the union bargaining climate even worse, the great Wall Street meltdown, and its continuing after-shocks, opened many eyes to the workings of the capitalist system. More than a few Americans discovered, at great personal cost, that the empire has no clothes. It has plenty of camo for sure– for well-equipped military forces deployed, at great tax-payer expense, around the globe. But the underpinnings of the U.S. financial system itself proved surprisingly shaky. When push came to shove in 2008, there was much emergency relief for those at the top of the heap and far less for the millions of wage-earners and home-owners, at the bottom, who experienced sudden downward mobility due to lay-offs, pay cuts, loss of home equity, and the evaporation of retirement savings.

By 2011–for the first time, in a long time–it appeared that a militant minority of “99 percenters” was finally responding appropriately to “1%” control of politics and the economy. Both the public employee fightback in Wisconsin and then the more diffuse and radical Occupy Wall Street movement became galvanizing experiences for several hundred thousand direct participants and a much larger audience of activists throughout the country.

Unfortunately, neither unexpected grassroots response to working class disempowerment and the (not unrelated) growth in economic inequality had a sufficient short-term impact on electoral politics. Only in Ohio was labor and its allies able to repeal, via popular referendum, a newly enacted Republican ban on public sector bargaining; in Wisconsin, union-backed efforts to recall Governor Scott Walker failed to achieve that goal so his repeal of government workers' rights remains partially intact (although subject to continuing litigation over its constitutionality).

Both Midwestern counter-campaigns, plus OWS in far more places, demonstrated that Corporate America's "divide and conquer" strategy could be thwarted. To rescind the anti-union legislation passed by Ohio Republicans, private and public sector workers collected 1.3 million signatures on their referendum petitions and then overcame government worker scapegoating, by the GOP, in the November, 2011 vote. In even more high-profile fashion, the "Wisconsin Uprising" united private and public sector union members, while enlisting the support of citizens dependent on all kinds of tax-supported state and local programs. Twenty months later, the September, 2012, strike by 25,000 Chicago school teachers provided yet another example of the powerful synergy of union reform, internal democracy, workplace militancy, and effective community organizing.

A Lesson Plan From Chicago

Within the Chicago Teachers Union, members first regained control over their union (through a leadership change), then engaged in systematic internal organizing to rebuild union structures, and next, carefully prepared for their September, 2012, contract showdown by doing systematic outreach to the community to neutralize, as much as possible, anti-union sentiment whipped up by city hall, the school board, and corporate-backed "education reform" groups. The expressions of bi-partisan solidarity with Democratic Mayor (and former White House chief of staff) Rahm Emanuel—that immediately flowed from the GOP presidential ticket when the teachers' strike began—was a fitting coda to the first half of the Obama era, with its "Race to the Top," that left public school teachers headed for the bottom.

Now, as in the past, the best starting point for broader union revitalization is not pie-in-the-sky blueprints that have little connection to current reality. Rather, it's the actual worker organizing and strike activity that has bravely defied recent labor-relations trends and demonstrated, by example, that another way is possible.

As Canadian union activist Peter Brogan observes about the CTU strike, "the biggest lesson for labor, especially public sector unions, is that reaching out to the public for support requires that you make your struggle their struggle. It has been vital for the CTU to cast this battle as one over the future of public education, not simply improvements to salary and working conditions services. By making the contract fight a component of a larger struggle against the corporatization of public schools, the CTU has provided public sector unions with a new model of resistance and unionism."

Militant teachers, more than most trade unionists, know that Obama has not been on their side, in Chicago or anywhere else. So a bit more union leadership candor about the limits of White House sympathy for labor might better align official rhetoric with the workplace reality experienced by the rank-and-file. For example, no amount of election year cheerleading for the president can erase the fact that his biggest domestic policy achievement, enactment of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), will not reduce management pressure for costly benefit givebacks. (PPACA also fails to address the needs of millions of workers, who lack bargaining rights but whose income level makes them ineligible for the expanded public coverage that will become available in many states via Medicaid). As long as labor, as a whole, remains saddled with a wasteful, inefficient system of job-based private insurance coverage, even workers employed by hugely profitable firms like Verizon, General Electric, or Caterpillar will face further demands for health care cost-shifting.

Casting a protest vote for a third party presidential candidate who supports a single payer system (like Jill Stein of the Green Party this year) was a hard sell, in labor circles, when Ralph Nader made real health care reform a centerpiece of his 2000 campaign. Only two small independent unions (the United Electrical Workers and the now AFL-CIO-affiliated California Nurse Association) broke with the Democrats (and the rest of labor) 12 years ago to back Nader. None will be making similar forays into independent politics this year.

A Green Mountain Model?

Yet, at the local and state level, in future election cycles, there is far more that organized labor could be doing to reduce its dependence on disappointing Democrats. In Vermont–that small northeastern oasis in an otherwise parched national political landscape—progressives have helped transform a one-time Republican redoubt into a laboratory for successful third party campaigns and cutting-edge grassroots organizing around health care and other issues.

Since 1981, socialist Bernie Sanders' independent campaigns for mayor of Burlington, the U.S. House of Representatives, and now the U.S. Senate have helped create the space for the emergence of an unabashedly pro-labor Vermont Progressive Party (VPP). By putting pressure on Obama-style Democrats from the left, Vermont progressives helped lay the groundwork for the state's current pioneering effort to create a Canadian-style single-payer health care system for its 600,000 citizens.

Through persistent grassroots organizing (and greater flexibility than many third parties have displayed elsewhere), the VPP now boasts seven members in the state legislature—two Senators and five representatives in the House (some of whom won with Democratic Party endorsements as well). Since Vermonters sent the first "Prog" to Montpelier in 1990, sixteen have served a total of 48 legislative terms in the state capitol. Despite the VPP's loss of Burlington City Hall in 2012—when a non-Progressive was elected mayor for only the second time since 1981—the party retains three city council seats (out of 14) in Vermont's largest municipality. More than 30 activists have been part of the Progressive bloc on that body over the years.

In this Fall's election, the VPP has a good shot at increasing its delegation in the state legislature thanks to the recruitment of new candidates like fifth-generation Vermonter Mike O'Day, a telephone company customer service rep and local leader of the Communications Workers of America (CWA). Taking a leaf from Sanders, VPP standard-bearers like O'Day focus, in populist fashion, on economic issues. In constituencies where working class voters might otherwise be swayed by cultural conservatism or residual rural Republicanism, Vermont Progressives have, like Sanders, won elections by championing workers rights, fair taxes, and single-payer health care.

Most impressively, given the pragmatism of organized labor, Progressives have weaned some local unions and statewide labor organizations away from knee-jerk endorsements of Democrats. According to Vermont AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer Traven Leyshon, who also serves on the VPP's state coordinating committee, "local labor leaders are now willing to support Progressive candidates over Democrats–when they're credible–because of their pro-labor stances." In some cases, Leyshon says, union rank-and-filers had to over-rule the safer, more centrist candidate endorsements favored by their own union lobbyists and political directors.

Is it possible to create "Two, Three, Many Vermonts?" Who knows—but developing the capacity for greater political independence is certainly worth a try. If just a small portion of the many millions of union dollars being poured into Obama's campaign were diverted to state and local initiatives like the VPP, we'd find out the answer, over time. And, in the meantime, more union members would have a party (or at least more political candidates) they could reliably call their own.

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Vote for Democrats—Then Organize to Kick Their Butts

By | 2012: vol. 11, no. 4

Of course it is lousy situation. These days voting for Democrats, however, helps build a bulwark against elitist reactionary rage at restrictions on their greed, and right-wing populist fears among white people over demographic changes in our population. Since the 1930s Organized Wealth has been trying to shred the meager social safety net woven during the Roosevelt Administration. These self-delusional greedsters have been working with right-wing ideologues to exacerbate fears of changes in "traditional" hierarchies of race and gender to genuine economic anxiety. The result is that today we face a Republican Party electoral campaign effort built on prejudice, scapegoating, and conspiracy theories. These vicious tools of fear have already given permission for aggression and violence against the named enemies of the "Real Americans." This trend will outlast the election. It must be met with resistance.

I understand the appeal of third parties, but the US is not a parliamentary system, and they have little chance of success. As G. William Domhoff notes:

When it comes to electoral systems, the United States is the most extreme of the countries with a single-member district plurality system, meaning that its third parties have been very small and ephemeral. They rarely win more than a percent or two of the vote, and rarely last more than one or two elections when they do receive more than a few percent.

Boycotting the election may make you feel superior, but frankly my dears, no one else gives a damn. Go for the tactic not the antic.

Strategically, we need to rebuild a broad-based and diverse movement for progressive social change. Strong militant social movements move electoral political parties in their direction—it is never the other way around. We need to be bold and take risks to stop the reactionary juggernaut. We know it is much more effective to organize from inside movements rather than pontificating about them from Ivory Towers of privilege. It is time to stop masturbating about real revolution and make real change with multiple partners. The next best thing to sex is the successful climax of an organizing campaign. (Often the two are related).

We need to craft a broad popular alliance while reclaiming the term "progressive" from Democratic Party hacks, former liberals, and neoconservatives. Obama is a centrist, not a progressive. He only appears to be on the Left to so many otherwise sensible people because the country has been shifted so far to the Right. Over a decade ago I wrote that progressives needed to face four fronts. I have updated the text slightly. We must organize against:

• The rise of reactionary populism, nativism, and fascism with roots in white supremacy, xenophobia, Islamophobia, antisemitism, subversion panics, and the many mutating offspring of conspiracist theories.

• Theocracy and other anti–democratic forms of religious fundamentalism, around the world, which in the US is based in White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism with its subtexts of patriarchy, misogyny, and homophobia.

• Authoritarian state actions in the form of militarism and interventionism abroad and government repression and erosion of civil liberties at home.

• The antidemocratic neocorporatism of multinational capital with its attack on the standard of living of working people around the globe.

Some of the most provocative and useful discussions of this multi-front approach are collected at Three Way Fight, "an insurgent blog on the struggle against the state and fascism."

Use Effective Methodologies

We need to defend dissent, promote power structure research, publically challenge conspiracist theories, and use new forms of communication.

Defend Dissent

We need to challenge oppression and repression. Political repression is rampant in the United States, and hampers our ability to reach whole sectors of our society. The new slogan of the Defending Dissent Foundation where I am a vice president is "Dissent is Essential!" Progressives should not be cheering when the government represses right-wing movements, groups, and individuals. Why would we encourage the abuse of state power when we or our friends will inevitably be the next targets of repression? Take the chant "No free speech for fascists" and rework it as "No free speech for environmental activists." Green is the new Red. Every progressive activist, no matter what our key issue of concern, should help restore the civil liberties we have lost since the terror attacks on September 11, 2001. To do this we should not fear temporary tactical alliances with conservatives and libertarians in defense of civil liberties, before all of us dissidents across the political spectrum get to chat about it together in the camps. Just trying to get your attention.…

Promote Power Structure Research

C. Wright Mills' famous study The Power Elite was published in 1956. It was a fortuitous moment, and was picked up by progressive activists along with the work of Karl Marx, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Paulo Freire. Miles Horton collected the works of these authors and others at the library of the Highlander Center which trained civil rights and labor activists, including Rosa Parks and a young minister named Martin Luther King, Jr.

Student activists participating in the Civil Rights Movement returned to their campuses and began to challenge entrenched autocratic systems of authority. Power structure research became the leading analytical tool within Left movements. From these roots sprang critical race theory, feminist theory, queer theory, ecological theories, and a variety of other analytical forms that grew in the 1970s and 1980s. Central to all of these analytical approaches is the idea that power structures are not composed of a few bad individuals and are not easily transformed with minor legislative tinkering. Instead, what is required are radical changes to the systems, structures, and institutions of power.

Well-known progressive activists who follow these analytical traditions range from democratic socialists Barbara Ehrenreich and Cornel West to left-libertarian egalitarians (anarcho-libertarian socialists), best represented by the work of Noam Chomsky. Today, academics such as G. William Domhoff, Adolph Reed, Jr., Henry Giroux, Abby Scher, and Jean Hardisty—as well as journalist-activists such as Holly Sklar, Roberto Lovato, Laura Flanders, and Amy Goodman—have refined the power structure research model. What all of these perspectives share is an analysis of complex systems of power, rather than a fixation on individuals who may or may not be involved in commonplace minor conspiracies. These sorts of conspiracies may line some bank accounts but almost never dramatically shape major historic social or political processes.

Publically Challenge Conspiracist Theories

Conspiracist theories are toxic to democracy because they are a narrative form of scapegoating. Matthew N. Lyons and I argue that:

Opposing scapegoating is both a moral issue and strategically vital because of the role scapegoating plays in building rightwing populism which can be harvested by fascism. Fascism begins by organizing a mass movement with bitter anti–regime rhetoric. Human rights organizers working for social and economic justice need to encourage forms of mass political participation, including democratic forms of populism, while simultaneously opposing scapegoating and conspiracism that often accompanies right-wing populism.

The removal of the obvious anti–communist underpinnings assisted left wing conspiracists in creating a parody of the fundamentalist/libertarian conspiracist critiques. Left wing conspiracists strip away the underlying religious fundamentalism, antisemitism, and economic social Darwinism, and peddle the repackaged product like carnival snake oil salesmen to unsuspecting sectors of the left. Those on the left who only see the antielitist aspects of right-wing populism and claim they are praiseworthy are playing with fire. Radical-sounding conspiracist critiques of the status quo are the wedge that fascism uses to penetrate and recruit from the left.

While few right-wing populist movements move on to become neofascist movements, fascism itself is the most aggressive form of right-wing populism.

More than a decade after the terror attacks on September 11, 2001 we still see some on the

Left embracing 9/11 conspiracy theories woven into critiques of US foreign policy by neofascists and antisemites, including former participants in the LaRouchite network. Examples include material from the Left/Right conspiracist Voltaire Network which end up posted on websites such as Counterpunch and the Centre for Research on Globalisation.

Use New Forms of Communication

We need to learn the new information dissemination methodologies made possible by electronic and online communications systems such as the Internet and cell phones. If you don't use Facebook and Twitter to organize, you are a dinosaur. At least post to a website or blog, or support one financially. Become familiar with online information sources including Alternet, the Public Eye, Talk to Action, and Z Magazine's ZCOM. There are many more worthy of support.

Reach Across Boundaries and Build Bridges

Issues of class, race, and gender are "omnipresent in the background of all forms of collective action," writes Buechler, and they reflect "institutional embeddedness within the social fabric at all levels." These are distinct yet overlapping structures of power that need to be assessed both independently and jointly, according to Buechler, and to do this it is important "to theorize the different, specific, underlying dynamics that distinguish one structure from another."

Over the years I have worked at bridge building with organizers such as Jean Hardisty, Suzanne Phar and Loretta Ross. Jean Hardisty is the founder and former director of Political Research Associates where I worked for thirty years. Pharr is former director of the Highlander Center in Tennessee, and author of, In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation; Ross is the former national coordinator of Sistersong, a women of color reproductive health collective in Atlanta, Georgia. Back in the mid-1990s it was clear to a large number of progressive organizers that we were facing a well-funded right-wing backlash against equality and liberation. Pharr asked Ross and me if we would help organize a national strategy meeting to talk about the breakdown in communications among different progressive constituencies. We called ourselves the Blue Mountain Working Group and after several days of intense conversation we issued a statement that included advice:

It is vital that we all share information, advice, criticisms, and assistance as we learn to work together. The anti-democratic right has a multi-issue strategic agenda, but its tactic is to focus its attacks on one high-visibility target constituency at a time. No single segment of our society has demonstrated an ability to resist these attacks alone. We must learn to work together. We urge everyone who desires to defend and extend democracy to join together in forming broad and diverse locally-based coalitions to resist the rollback of rights; to block the backlash; to fight the right.

Especially when bridge building, it is imperative to listen respectfully to the stories and grievances of the people we are mobilizing and recruiting. As Ross puts it, "You can't organize

people you don't respect. And don't try to pretend otherwise…people aren't stupid and they know you are just pretending." As we speak truth to power, we must learn to use plain language and not be afraid to show emotion which connects us to the real struggles of most people.

We also must challenge the language of liberalism. There is a slogan in anti-racist work: "In Tolerance there is no Respect." Anti-prejudice programs that avoid dealing with systems of oppression (and our complicity in perpetuating them) tend to shift the solutions to law enforcement by talking about "extremists" and "extremism" or "hate groups." This fails to address the roots of bigotry in hierarchies of power, and to also undermine civil liberties. The term "extremism" itself was popularized in the mid-1960s as a way to lump the white racist Segregationist Movement and the pro-equality Civil Rights Movement together as troublemakers. Every time a person on the Left uses the term "extremist" to blast right-wing opponents, it further marginalizes out work as progressives who strive for radical change.

And when speaking about language, those of us who only can speak English should consider learning another language spoken in the area in which we live. My spouse and I are learning Spanish. Loro viejo aprende a hablar! (Idiomatic equivalent of the old dog can learn new tricks, except it is a parrot).

Make Movement Building a Priority

Effective social movements need a stable infrastructure to survive and force substantial changes in a society. What does it take to build a strong social movement? With a tip of the intellectual hat to a boatload of sociologists and other social scientists, here is a list of ingredients:

• A discontented group of politicized persons who share the perception that they have common grievances they want society to address

• A powerful and lucid ideological vision linked to strategies and tactics that have some reasonable chance of success I The recruitment of people into the movement through pre□existing social, political, and cultural networks

• A core group of trusted strategic leaders and local activists who effectively mobilize, organize, educate, and communicate with the politicized mass base

• The efficient mobilization of resources that are available, or can be developed, to assist the movement to meet its goals

• An institutional infrastructure integrating political coordination, research and policy think tanks, training centers, conferences, and alternative media

• Political opportunities in the larger social and political scene that can be exploited

by movement leaders and activists

• The skillful framing of ideas and slogans for multiple audiences such as leaders, members, potential recruits, policymakers, and the general public

• An attractive movement culture that creates a sense of community through mass rituals, celebrations, music, drama, poetry, art, and narrative stories about past victories, current struggles, and future successes

• The ability of recruits to craft a coherent and functional identity as a movement participant

Starting in the 1970s, the Political Right funded a conservative social movement that stood outside the Republican Party. They funded a robust infrastructure that allowed the network of social movement organization to pull the Republican Party to the Right. Since the mid 1970s a small group of us have studied how right-wing organizers and corporate strategists accomplished this. It was never a mystery. They wrote how they planned to do it. Then they did it. A few years ago with much ballyhoo the liberal Democracy Alliance was formed and raised tens of millions of dollars with the claim they had discovered the secret to how the Right-wing juggernaut was built. Radical left movement publications had been explaining it for years.

We knew that the elites of organized wealth and corporations (working with political right ideologues) funded opposition political/electoral work and movement building; both opposition research and strategic research; both national and local organizations; both campaign advertising and small publications and journals where ideas had consequences. The Democracy Alliance spent millions to create inside-the-beltway think tanks and other organizations tied to Democratic Party political campaigns and electoral opposition research. Some of these groups have done useful work…but it is not movement building. Meanwhile scores of progressive organizations have gone under, or refocused their work to chase dwindling foundation dollars for projects that appeal to the latest liberal fad—along the way burning out their own progressive staff in a desperate attempt to survive.

We need to recover the idea of setting “principles of unity” for coalition events, and develop methods for dealing with disruptions in our organizations that humanely reach out to troubled persons yet allow work to go forward. Every group needs to develop their own unique approach to how to handle disruptive persons. In doing so we need to condemn “agent baiting,” in which persons are accused of working for the government without a shred of evidence.

If a coalition event is built around closing an incinerator in a people of color community, then speakers from the podium should respect the principles of unity and not call for an end to the war in Afghanistan, no matter how sincere they are about that belief. Adding a laundry list of demands to an event is not an effective educational practice. It makes potential recruits feel they have no place in a larger movement. Sociologists now know that people join movements because they have a specific grievance. As they get recruited into a social movement, they then

learn the larger ideological issues and broader explanations through exposure to frames and narratives.

Sociological narratives are simply stories that serve as teaching tools. They work best when told in the first person. It is better to help train union members on strike (and their spouses) to tell the story of their experiences and the stress put on their family than to have an academic give a lecture on capitalism and surplus value.

Use a Human Rights Framework

Many of us are already using Human Rights as a compelling master frame for uniting progressive movements. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the inherent dignity of all members of the human family. Human Rights are those rights that are universal and inalienable; and which provide the foundations for justice and peace in the world. Human rights include specific social, economic, cultural, civil, and political rights for people of all ages; races; ethnicities; religious, spiritual, or ethical beliefs; gender; sexual orientation; or ability. This type of "Panoply Praxis" prepares us for facing multiple issues and multiple aggressors. Panoply is a term culled from the early Greek for a complete suit of armor.

A progressive human rights perspective sees liberty, freedom, laws, and rights as an essential framework, but envisions justice as the goal. Democracy thrives where human rights are defended and justice is honored as a collective goal of society. No justice, no peace. Ultimately, the successful assertion of "collective human rights" or "group rights" depends on the "linking of ethnicity/race, class, gender, and sexuality," argues Felice, because this linkage "mutes supremacist tendencies by denying the right of any one group to assert supremacy over a different group".

See Yourself as a Link on a Chain

Organizing for human rights is like canoeing upstream…if we stop paddling we go backwards. We must embrace humility and learn from our mistakes; criticize constructively, and be willing to step aside and trust the next generation of activists.

For example, Marina Sitrin, an experienced progressive activist and scholar, thinks too many in the traditional organized Left have misconceptions about the Occupy Movement. Sitrin was drawn to the Occupy Wall Street encampment in New York City from its earliest days. She recognizes that the way Occupy functions is confusing or frustrating to some on the Left.

"There are people who think Occupy is wrong because we don't share the same strategy as they do." According to Sitrin she has seen this, among people from the Old Left who are "really convinced that building strong left political parties," is essential for organizing. "They have very strong positions on this question and they have lived for a very long time championing those positions. Then they run into a movement that does not want to build a party, confront agencies of the state, or take over the government, and they don't know what to make of us."

“Some people think that since Occupy doesn’t issue demands and does not engage the state directly that we have not been effective, says Sitrin. “Our point of reference is each other. We organize not by letter writing or voting or asking the state for concession—we occupy, and that has been effective.” Sitrin argues “it is not a contradiction for this to be true” and has documented her claim:

Throughout the United States, in large cities and small towns, people inspired by the politics and tactics of Occupy have been organizing to defend people from evictions, from the neighborhood of Bernal Heights in San Francisco to suburbs in midwestern Minnesota and Iowa. The form is the same. Neighbors come together, sometimes going door to door, sometimes meeting in a person’s home, and discuss who is at risk of foreclosure and what to do about it, often physically defending homes from eviction as well as petitioning for new terms for living in the home with the bank. Anyone who has been to one of these home defenses, or even looked at the photos, will quickly get a sense of what this means: teenagers in sports jackets, mothers holding children, grandparents and neighbors and activists, all together gather to prevent an eviction or foreclosure from taking place. In most cases they win, forcing the banks to allow people to keep their homes instead of being cast out on the street.

As a scholar, Sitrin has studied and written about different concepts of power in liberatory social and political movements and the use of autonomism and horizontalism as organizing frameworks for creating change. She points out that autonomous social movements in Argentina are part of a global phenomenon of horizontalism that emerged before the Occupy movement, and similar structures were later established in Greece.

In the United States, “Occupy as a movement or network is not campaigning for any candidate in the 2012 election because we do not believe that elections are how we choose to change the world,” says Sitrin, “Most occupy participants will vote anyway – but this is not a contradiction either, and does not mean that there is a confidence in the electoral system as a site of change – more likely people are seeing it as merely a defensive move.”

Defend the Promise of Democracy

As we promote progressive solutions, we must also join with all persons across the political spectrum to defend the basic ideas of mass democracy, even as we argue that it is an idea that has never been real for many here in our country. The principles of the Enlightenment are not our goal, but resisting attempts to push political discourse back to pre–enlightenment principles is nonetheless a worthy effort.

We have to have faith in democracy as a potential, and reject liberal and conservative claims that democracy is a set of specific institutions created by white male northern Europeans who stole land, murdered the indigenous people, kept slaves, and then launched war after war around the world. What a load of crap. Who are we kidding?

Democracy is not a specific set of institutions but a process that requires dissent. Democracy is a process that assumes the majority of people, over time; given enough accurate information,

and the ability to participate in a free and open public debate; reach constructive decisions that benefit the whole of society; and thus preserve liberty, protect our freedoms, extend equality, and defend democracy.

The end of our statement from the Blue Mountain Working Group issued in 1994 still resonates as a call to action:

The time has come to stand up and vigorously defend democracy and pluralism against the attacks orchestrated by cynical leaders of the anti-democratic right. History teaches us that there can be no freedom without liberty, no liberty without justice, and no justice without equality; and we look forward to success because we know it is through the never-ending struggle for equality, justice, liberty and freedom that democracy is nourished.

***Chip Berlet**, a freelance journalist and scholar, worked as an analyst and progressive movement strategist for over thirty years at Political Research Associates. He is currently a vice president of the Defending Dissent Foundation and working on a book on organized wealth and the attack on working people. A webpage with online links illustrating or expanding on this essay is at https://www.organizedwealth.us/movement/building/kick-butt.html.*

Founding Principles

By | 2012: vol. 11, no. 4

What's at stake in this year's election? Paul Ryan's speech at this year's Republican National Convention offers a clue. Ryan noted that the GOP "will not try to replace our founding principles; we will reapply our founding principles." Of course, we need to exercise caution here; convention speeches are much more about media messaging than political ideas. In 2008, Sarah Palin talked about her "servant's heart" because she was speaking in code to social conservatives; while most Americans heard a flowery phrase, Palin was using the language of Christian evangelicals to signal that she was one of their kind. Similarly, Ryan's claims over "founding principles" are a likely nod to the Tea Party's obsession with what George Washington had for breakfast. (This particular catchphrase must be testing well since, a month after the convention, Ryan again was telling Fox News' Chris Wallace that "the President is replacing our founding principles.") But Ryan's reference to the founders during his convention speech was not merely a framing device. He actually was getting at the heart of the conservative project; he was, perhaps surprisingly, speaking the truth. The American Right is, in fact, trying to return us to the principles of our founding – or at least some of them.

Looking to first principles often leads us to the theorists who can best explain our current politics: Marx, Hegel, Agamben. Yet this election year I am struck most by the textbook I use in my American Government class. *The Democratic Debate* (written by a number of scholars, including Bruce Miroff and Todd Swanstrom) is, like any textbook, far from perfect, but it's a little less sunshiny about the deficiencies of American democracy than many. What I like most about this text is its central premise: the book claims that we can best understand the development of American institutions as an argument between two different views of democracy. *Popular democrats* push for as much participation from as many citizens as possible; for these folks, truly direct democracy may be an unattainable ideal in a modern setting, but we should work towards it as best as we can. *Elite democrats*, on the other hand, view free and fair elections as both necessary and sufficient for a functioning democracy. Once these elections are held, our representatives are free to pursue the policies they think best for the country without interference.

Today it is Fox News, Crossroads GPS, and the Republican Party who carry the torch for elite democracy. Whether they admit it or not, they are promoting the idea of "big boy politics": the rest of us should run along and play, and let the grown-ups decide. But today's conservatives go beyond just limiting public participation to voting and demand – as, to be fair, most elite democrats do – that even this basic right must be limited to the select few. Elections should be free and fair but also for the informed, with the further implication that they should be left to those who understand what is at stake. The proliferation of state Voter ID laws are the clearest manifestation of this idea that many, if not most of us, are simply not qualified to participate in

the governing of our nation in any substantive way. (These laws are also a pretty smart electoral strategy, and may be the only play left for a party facing increasingly unfavorable national demographics.)

And of course, elite democrats have plenty of evidence on their side. Snooki, Honey Boo Boo, and the rapidly growing species of *Verus Housewife* are easy targets for conservatives who want to idealize some past era during which all voters read newspapers and watched Cronkite every night. But like a broken clock, even the Family Research Council is right to notice that much of our culture is shallow, dominated by the supply of frenzied entertainment rather than anything of substance. My American Government students, almost entirely 17-19 year olds, are products of this culture, and they almost always respond to my textbook as knee-jerk elite democrats. They adopt this view despite the fact that many of them would not pass an American citizenship test. In some cases they adopt elite democracy *because* of their deficiencies; they want to save the country from ignoramuses like themselves. It's hard not to sympathize with them, especially when so many of the "47%" that Romney dismissed as "freeloaders" are going to vote for their favorite white millionaire anyway.

The irony of these freeloaders' support of GOP candidates sharpens when we consider the Tea Party, whose delusions are too numerous to detail here. Unlike Matt Taibbi, who thinks that they are just "full of shit," I tend to be more sympathetic to the teabaggers, obsessive Fox-watchers and self-loathing government-haters among us. After all, they've watched the brief promise of functional democracy and shared affluence that was offered in the post-war twentieth century – a flawed promise, of course, but still – crumble along with their pension accounts. It's not exactly their fault that they don't know who to blame, and instead do what working class Americans have always done: blame the guy with darker skin. And so when they, and most Americans along with them, call for a return to Paul Ryan's "founding principles," they mean a renewed democracy, opportunity for all, and a return to the greatness they imagine as the default mode of American operations. This kind of thinking is fine, as far as it goes – Americans are generally a decent and well-meaning sort, if they can avoid invading other countries for even a short while– only these are NOT the "founding principles" that Ryan and the Republicans are actually going to restore.

It probably goes without saying that our nation's founders were elite democrats, distrustful of the yeoman farmers and property-less masses that threatened to undermine the nation's stability and prosperity. (Or worse, cancel the significant debts they owed the nation's financial class who, as always, saw little need to modify loan terms for poor debtors just because the country had entered a crippling recession.) Our constitution is the product of a true aristocracy: wealthy, educated men from the Virginia landed gentry and the northeastern financial elite. Again, this is not news for those who have even a passing interest in American history. Almost a century ago, historian Charles Beard made the point, if a little too strongly, that our founders' constitutional choices didn't exactly hurt their economic interests. And we're reminded of the founders' distrust of the masses every time there's a hiccup in the Electoral College.

Apologists for aristocracy note that if you get the right guys in place than everything can work out in the end. Plato's guardians were reluctant rulers, chosen for their wisdom and trained by an educational system that honed their natural talents. If anyone from history ever resembled such a philosopher king, it was George Washington; if he, Madison, Jefferson and Hamilton are your aristocrats, you can end up with a reasonably stable federal system that even occasionally enforces a Bill of Rights. Today we get Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan. (Maybe I don't need to lay this out, but just in case: Mitt Romney is no James Madison.) We get a host of painted clowns like Palin and Perry and Bachmann, awful people who only know wisdom as a town in Montana. These professional politicians – shills for corporate America to a man and woman – envision a country in which most of us sacrifice everything so that a privileged few have the opportunity to prosper.

So again, what principles are at stake in this election? If you believe the gang that wrote my American Government textbook, they are the same principles at issue in every American election since the debates on constitutional ratification (the first of many defeats for popular democrats, by the way). They are, on one hand, the belief in a robust, participatory democracy versus, on the other, the Republicans' offer of aristocracy. In the most generous reading of their rhetoric, conservatives want us to be led by the best and brightest among us; but I think we can be forgiven if we think we'll end up mainly with anyone with a country club membership. So if the Republicans are our enemy, then we are left with the other guys as the last defenders of participatory, popular democracy. I know that's not the best of news.

Take education policy, for instance. John Dewey, agreeing with Plato, recognized that a decent education was essential for human flourishing. More importantly, Dewey thought that educational reforms could produce the "organized intelligence" necessary to confront the dire social problems of the industrial age. An educational system that churned out active and engaged citizens would form a symbiosis with a participatory democracy. Sure, we'd get it wrong sometimes – even Dewey might not have been able to stop No Child Left Behind – but we'd be transformed even by the attempt. Instead, today even the Democratic Party seeks to "reform" public education with neoliberal catchphrases like privatization, de-unionization, and standardization. To "fix" the schools, they'll listen to everyone but the teachers, administrators and parents who are the actual stakeholders.

The good news is that no one who has ever really worked for a living likes any of this. Even Tea Partiers, while they hate the "teachers" that Scott Walker portray as parasites on the public weal, generally like the ones that teach in their kids' schools. The bad news is that with both parties locked into the idea of "transforming" public education by turning schools into Wal-Marts, the same hard road faces progressives that they've had since the New Deal fell apart (and probably before). It will take the usual bag of tricks to knock the Democrats off course: using whatever older institutions (read: unions) that still have enough battery life to produce political pressure while leveraging the power of new institutions and strategies (read: Occupy) to lay out a different path. The eventual goal is Dewey's dream of an educational system that ensures real equality of opportunity and a substantive civic education to all. In the meantime we'll take more Chicago-style strikes and more push-back against the corporate raiders. And

we'll need to force the Democratic Party – as always, the lesser evil – into buying into the solution, even if their leaders just see it as a marketing strategy.

I am not exactly optimistic about the chances of success. But the only alternative is to succumb to the "founding principles" promised by Ryan, Romney, and the rest of the elite democrats of the Republican Party. They remind us that the aristocratic values of property, hierarchy, and supremacy are part of our constitutional history, and require real political work to overcome. Maybe when enough Americans feel like three-fifths of a person we'll all see what we're up against.

What’s Wrong with Victims?

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The public commotion that followed the release of a tape featuring Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney’s remarks during a $50,000-a-plate Florida fundraiser focused on his dismissing 47% of voters. Pollsters and statisticians dissected his calculations, while strategists and pundits demurred over the political wisdom of these “off the cuff” remarks. The Obama campaign swiftly reproached the GOP candidate for his imprudent disregard of nearly half the population. At first, Governor Romney refused to disavow his comments, but conceded, with feigned sheepishness, that his statement was “ineloquently stated.” A month later, he finally admits he was “completely wrong,” at least with respect to the number of Americans who do not pay federal income taxes.

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Amid all the commentary and number crunching, however, Governor Romney’s syntax remains unexamined. He revealed his conviction that individuals who avail themselves of social welfare programs relinquish their autonomy and self-respect by indulging in a pathetic, if not pathological, dependency on the state. Importantly, he characterized all recipients of government support as those who “believe they are victims.” In his formulation, victims are beyond redemption. “My job is not to worry about those people,” Mr. Romney reasoned. “I’ll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives.” This aspect of Mr. Romney’s presentation went unchallenged. Even as he chided his opponent, the President never disputed Romney’s characterization of victims. Appearing on The Late Show the following day, President Obama defended the disparaged 47% by asserting: “There are not a lot of people out there who think they are victims.” On the stump in Woodbridge, VA, he reiterated this sentiment: “I don’t see a lot of victims in this crowd today. I see hard-working Virginians.”

What happened to the term ‘victim’ in American political discourse, and how might a question of semantics be important in the upcoming election?

Thirty years ago Governor Romney’s use of ‘victim’ to dismiss, ridicule, and condemn, would have been unthinkable, even among like-minded conservatives. Ever since the 1980s, a cynical conception of victimhood has been deployed to attack the remnants of the Great Society, multiculturalism, the welfare state, and other progressive causes and policies, such as affirmative action. The word consistently appears between actual or implied quotation marks. The victim is always a “victim,” a faux-victim, a participant in a sham to exploit the state, milk the public’s coffers, and reap undeserved compassion. Politicians and commentators across the

political spectrum—including, implicitly, President Obama — seem to agree that victims are manipulative, self-indulgent, helpless, hopeless dependents, not "personally responsible," "hardworking individuals" meriting concern, empathy, or even pity. 'Victim' became a term of derision, an epithet.

In framing his criticism of Governor Romney's remarks in terms of a President's obligation to represent "100 percent" of the nation, while simultaneously retaining the distinction between "the hardest working people there are" and those who "abuse the system" by "looking for a hand out," President Obama missed an opportunity. He failed to expose and contest the conservative conceptual apparatus that enabled the dismantling of the welfare state, a campaign that has relied on a particular conception of victimhood. That President Obama sustained rather than questioned Governor Romney's pernicious use of the language of victimhood and it collateral politics should, perhaps, not be surprising. After all, the Democratic Leadership Council had already devoted the entire November 1992 issue of The New Democrat to the theme of "Getting Beyond Victimization," which included essays exposing the pervasiveness of a "victim mentality" among African Americans, Latinos, women, gays and lesbians, and even inner-city mayors. As contributor Errol Smith summed up the new Democratic program, "If we do nothing else in the next decade except reject this victim identity . . . the nation will have taken a quantum leap forward. The more detached we are from 'victim' mentality, the more responsible for ourselves, the less likely we will become victims."

However, Mr. Romney's remarks pushed the anti-victim agenda even further, constituting a brazen, and perhaps strategically savvy, attempt to deny recent history. The problem we face today is not that reckless financial institutions and an indifferent Republican government victimized Americans, leaving millions in the wake of the 2008 meltdown jobless and in financial ruins. Rather, these beyond-repair individuals, who somehow, inexplicably, came to regard themselves as victimized, and in the process developed an acute addiction to governmental assistance, plague the nation. In this way, Governor Romney suggests victims are not merely deplorable, but actually victimizers.

When sociologist William Ryan introduced the phrase "blaming the victim" into public vernacular in 1971 to expose how social reformers collude in the oppression of the poor by finding inherent faults within them, while ignoring the social and economic forces that create and perpetuate poverty, there was at least a tacit agreement between him and those he criticized that something should be done to help the disadvantaged. Now, blaming victims has become a prescription, perhaps most evident in the way in which 'victim' is deployed pejoratively. In contrast to most previous uses, the designation refers to an individual's character, how they grapple with their circumstances, not the injustice they endured. This shift from a verb ('victimized') to a noun ('victim,' and recent variations such as "victimist," "victim politics," "victim revolutionaries," and "victimism") has become so prevalent that it seems simply a matter of common sense. No one wants to be victimized, of course, but we seem to have forgotten that, as the political theorist Judith Shklar observed, victimization "happens to us, it is not a quality."

The imbroglio over another off-the-cuff remark, Todd Atkin's oxymoronic phrase "legitimate rape," is one of the few contexts in which the victimization of some has been debated as a real concern during the 2012 election season. Nevertheless, the point of Atkin's semantic construction was to distinguish true victims of rape from false ones, i.e., those supposedly legitimated raped. Here, as in other contexts, skillful rhetoric performs the profound political work of predicating victim status on complete helplessness and absolute innocence. This highly rigid juridical model of victimhood applies to all types of victimization. In doing so, it stifles the majority of victim claims, radically narrows the scope of those who might rightfully seek victim status, and confines redress to retributive actions by the State.

The crusade to shame victims has been so successful that even those whose victim position would be readily acknowledged under the most stringent criteria, perform linguistic gymnastics to disavow the designation, preferring the designation 'survivor' instead. The brutalized Central Park jogger, Trisha Meili, for example, waited fifteen years to come forth to narrate her tale of survivorship, which she describes as a "story of hope and possibility." Professional victim advocates encourage this trend of renouncing victimhood. A study published in National Law Journal, for instance, found that social workers recommend renaming victims' services – such as battered women's shelters – "survivors' agencies." This new classification, proponents explains is "less passive, negative and disempowering."

By investing victimhood with new meanings and rendering it a badge of shame, the Right has made it difficult to address institutional forms of hierarchy or privilege, systemic kinds of domination, pervasive manifestations of social injustice that advantage some by subordinating others. Unremittingly privatizing and therapeutic, issues of institutional power and social inequity are displaced into matters of character. By casting political demands as nothing more than personal attitudes or feelings –individual defects or faults — collective, political solutions can be delegitmized. After all, no one need be a victim, because each of us could be self-determining if only we have the right character, and we can.

This link between victimization and supposed victim mentality should not be taken for granted. After all, acknowledging oneself or one's group as victimized is arguably a necessary first step toward political action, requiring courage and strength, not a symptom of paralyzing dependency, endemic powerlessness, or a boundless sense of entitlement. We must insist on the demystification and propriety of the term 'victim' in designating social injustice. It is not that the concept of 'victimization' has an inherent value that is absent in other terms of injustice such as 'discrimination,' 'exploitation' and 'marginalization.' In dispensing with 'victim,' however, we succumb to an ongoing campaign to purge our language, our consciousness, and our public sphere of words and concepts (such as 'feminist' or 'liberal') that acquired the taint of illegitimacy simply based on their association with progressive politics. We thus diminish our capacity to speak truth to power and to effectively politicize injustice. In 1905, W.E.B DuBois wrote: "What must we do? We must complain. Yes, plain, blunt complaint, ceaseless agitation, unfailing exposure of dishonesty and wrong—this is the ancient, unerring way to liberty, and we must follow it. I know the ears of the American people have become very sensitive to . . . complaint of late and profess to dislike whining. Let that worry none. No nation

on earth ever complained and whined so much as this nation has, and we propose to follow the example."

DuBois envisioned a social movement, emboldening the fight for radical change, but who occupies the White House still matters as well. The 2012 election presents a choice between a candidate who at least has pledged to rebuild a social safety net capacious enough to include the disadvantaged, and one who aims to accelerate the neoliberal project of further enfeebling government by advancing a politically insidious therapeutics that reduces grievance to grief, except, perhaps, when it comes to the complaints of the Tea Party. After all, as he titled his autobiography, Governor Romney believes "No Apologies" are needed. The President may be entrapped in the anti-victim discourse, but his policies, for the most part, have not relied on distinguishing "true victims" from false ones, and he certainly has not cast victims as victimizers. We may tepidly hope, therefore, that he, unlike Governor Romney, will enjoin Americans to resist the temptation to shame victims into silence and that government will be more receptive when self-conscious victims compel his administration and us to live up to America's democratic promise.

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