

The Disintegration of Bourgeois Democracy

By Charles Andrews

The ruling class of the United States has enjoyed widespread popular belief in a myth for almost our entire history, the myth that we live in a democratic republic. Under the rule of law, competition between different opinions and interests results in "the intellectual and industrial progress of the people."¹

We were taught elements of the myth in high school civics class – election of public officials by vote of the people; checks and balances between separate legislative, executive, and judicial powers; the gradual expansion of rights to the entire population; and so on. Some people are cynical about it, and most people surmise that exceptional things happen behind closed doors. Yet no coherent alternative explanation of how society is governed rivaled it.

Bourgeois democracy was both a myth and a genuine practice in the governance of capitalism. Political leaders and the Establishment took care in public to follow the rules. Action in violation of them was usually done behind the scenes.²

This year highlights a change that has been underway for several decades. The smooth operation of bourgeois democracy has become more difficult. A brief list of events around the presidency since 1960 charts the disintegration.

• In 1960 John F. Kennedy won a close presidential election. Ballot stuffing in Illinois was crucial to his

victory. The machine headed by mayor Daley of Chicago made sure that fake votes there outweighed the real votes from downstate. Neither Kennedy's opponent, Richard Nixon, nor the Establishment as a whole challenged the vote fraud, and most people did not even know about it.

• In 1963 a part of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assassinated Kennedy. The entire ruling class mobilized for a cover-up under the banner of the Warren Commission. The only political figure to challenge the lone-assassin story was Jim Garrison, a district attorney in Louisiana. He fought by judicial means, ironically putting faith in bourgeois democracy. A large part of the public did not accept the Oswald theory, but their disbelief was passive and scattered among several fake stories, such as that the Mafia was the main force behind the assassination.

• In 1972 presidential candidate George McGovern, desperate to find a vice-presidential running mate on his doomed ticket, finally got assent from Missouri senator Thomas Eagleton. It turned out that Eagleton molested young boys.³ Neither the press nor any politicians said a word in public. A sorrowful explanation was given that Eagleton suffered bouts of depression, and he withdrew.

• The victor, Richard Nixon, apparently believed that the president has personal power above that of the ruling class of which he is merely the most prominent public member. He shook down corporations, which was

outrageous behavior to the big bourgeoisie. They brought him down in 1974 with the Watergate scandal. It turned on Nixon's secret tape recorder in the Oval Office. A former staff employee in the White House, Alexander Butterfield, revealed the tapes during testimony to Congress.⁴ That was enough for the full machinery of the ruling class and its media to drive Nixon out of office. The reality was turned into its opposite for the public: checks and balances work; we got a reformed, more democratic government out of Nixon's transgression.

Bourgeois Rule Comes into the Open

In all these events, the actual governance of the country went on behind the scenes. The ruling class, whatever its internal battles, united to maintain the myth of bourgeois democracy. Then things began to change.

The public saw it happen sixteen years ago. Al Gore won the presidential vote in 2000, but the Bush camp would not accept defeat. An extended, public legal brawl ensued over who won Florida. The Supreme Court halted the vote count on a Saturday afternoon, then settled the matter with a clearly illegal ruling. The president was chosen that year by five to four – not by a five to four ratio of the voters, but by the decision of nine persons.

One justice wrote as openly as he dared about the damage that the court did to the myth of bourgeois democracy: "The political implications of this case for the country are momentous. ... Above all, in this highly politicized matter, the appearance of a

split decision runs the risk of undermining the public's confidence in the Court itself. That confidence is a public treasure. It is ... a vitally necessary ingredient of ... the rule of law itself."⁵

Candidate Gore himself did not rock the boat. Suppose he had gone on television during the legal battle and asked Americans to light a candle one evening in their window or on their lawn as a gesture of support for a full count of the votes. That would have brought the masses into things, but the situation was too volatile for a member of the ruling class to do that.

(Instead, Democratic Party operatives to this day vent their rage – not on the Bush camp for breaking the norms of constitutional rule, not on the Supreme Court, but on alleged "spoiler" Ralph Nader. The facts in Florida show that the charge is likely false and certainly unproved. For example, a CNN exit poll found that Nader took one percent of the votes from both Gore and Bush, while thirteen percent of registered Democrats voted for Bush.⁶)

The three major candidates of the presidential primary season this year demonstrate that the rot of bourgeois democracy has proceeded much further.

Donald Trump is a con man, a cheat, a liar from the gutter, and a demagogue. Cynics might observe that so are a lot of other public figures. The difference is that Trump is at the level of the huckster who stars in his own nighttime television commercials. He promises you the secret to riches in real estate, hooks you for \$39.95, and always has the next level of seminar to sell you. Trump University did the same thing, ruining the lives of victims who

paid thousands of dollars under the relentless assault of Trump's boiler room salesmen.⁷

So far as we know, Trump started with no significant backing from the capitalist class. His first known meeting with a big mogul was in December 2015 with Sheldon Adelson, a casino owner and front man for gangsters. Yet from the summer of 2015 the media inflated Trump into a major candidate. The Establishment let him drag public discourse to a new low right until he became the Republican nominee.

Sixty years ago Walter Cronkite and CBS News would never have covered a man like Trump, nor would the other two television networks of that time. The Establishment would have swatted him down with a flick of its collective wrist. The ruling class was more unified then. The chief executive of CBS and the publishers of The New York Times and the Washington Post held regular chats with Allen Dulles, head of the CIA.⁸ Trump simply could not have broken into the circle.

Hillary Clinton is the Establishment candidate of the trio, yet she has severe problems that might well have ruled out her candidacy back then. (The fact that she is a woman is hailed as a breakthrough, although dozens of women long ago became premier of their country, among them Golda Meir in Israel, Margaret Thatcher in Britain, and Indira Gandhi in India.) For one thing, the private email server that Clinton maintained while she was secretary of state will dog her from day one of her presidency. Already, news coverage has begun to move beyond the issue of classified emails. The Clintons receive bribes at the Clinton Foundation in return for exercising

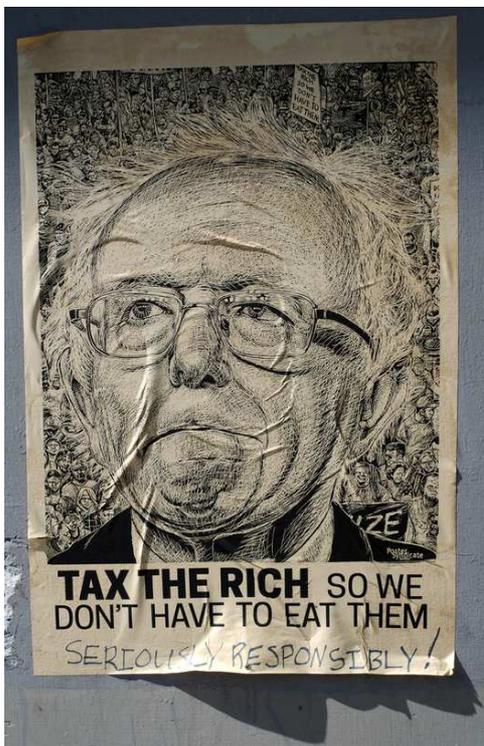
their influence on U.S. government decisions to the benefit of a foreign capitalist or government. The private email setup facilitated the scheme. The fact that the Clintons can foist a president Hillary on the Democratic Party is more evidence of the decay of bourgeois democracy.

The funding of the Clinton campaign primarily by bankers and other capitalists is not new in politics, but public knowledge of it this year is remarkable. Bernie Sanders hammered home the contrast between Clinton's \$200,000-plus speeches to Goldman Sachs and the average contribution of \$27 to his campaign. As recently as 2008, Barack Obama easily buried the fact that Wall Street financiers provided the core of his funds. They and the Pritzker hotel and real estate family hand-picked him. Obama rose from a minor office in Illinois to the U.S. Senate, gave the keynote speech at the 2004 national Democratic convention, and ran for president before he had served a full term as senator. It was odd, to say the least, but little public scrutiny was given to those who helped it happen. By contrast, before the closing bell of the Democratic convention this summer, the New York Times published an account of how rich contributors, after they had to lie low during the primaries, flocked to Philadelphia and networked with each other and the Clinton camp in luxury hotel suites.⁹

Everyone knows that Bernie Sanders is a breakthrough candidate. He unleashed mass sentiment of class against class not seen since the 1930s. Sometimes he drew the lines as boldly as Franklin D. Roosevelt did at his height in 1936. Sanders, bringing

popular anger at capitalism and our worsening fate into the open, confirmed for many that the United States today does not have a government for the people, let alone by the people and of the people.

Instead of bourgeois democracy, Sanders promotes social democracy, the essence of which we will examine in a moment. A print in woodcut style issued by the Poster Syndicate of San Francisco and pasted on freeway pillars sums up the arc of the Sanders movement in a slogan: Tax the Rich So We Don't Have to Eat Them. (This was not an official Sanders slogan.) During Sanders' ascending phase the emphasis was on taxing the rich. Yes, let us do that so we can fund guaranteed, improved Medicare for All and free college for everyone. Then came the inevitable denouement. The Democratic Party's super-delegates, rigged caucuses, and general Clinton favoritism took the nomination from



him. Events demonstrated that we cannot get what we need under this regime – we do have to eat the rich. That is, overthrow capitalism, take their property in our wealth, and replace exploitation with socialism. This reality deflated the campaign, since Sanders made it clear, "I don't believe government should own the means of production."¹⁰

Why the Disintegration of Bourgeois Democracy?

Liberal intellectuals sneer at Marxism. They charge that it explains history with a false, reductionist principle, namely, that each person and group acts in society according to the financial gain or cost at stake. One can learn a lot by following the money, but that is not what historical materialism is about. It looks among other things at the *processes* of economic life and how they change over time. Why has bourgeois democracy started to disintegrate? A big part of the answer lies in the changing way that capitalists get profit.

Capitalist businesses can get profit in two different ways. The profits of one category of capital are all or largely the surplus value produced by their own workforce. The automobile corporations during their growth decades are an example. They and their suppliers made huge profits because they employed millions of workers across the industrial Midwest and the entire country.¹¹

The alternative way to seize profit is by capturing surplus value from other capitalists. This category of capitals obtains far more profit than their comparatively few employees produce.

It is done in various ways. Finance capital comes to mind first: investment banks, hedge funds, and wheeler-dealers who get huge profits create little to no surplus value. They are parasites on the first category of capital.

Another variety of these capitals are extreme technological monopolies that sit on top of so-called value chains. Apple Corporation has about 115,000 employees, a small number for its operating income of about \$70 billion. Each employee did not produce \$600,000 of surplus value. Rather, Apple is able to dictate terms to suppliers in China and around the world who survive on much smaller margins. Hundreds of thousands of non-Apple workers produce that surplus value.

Although capitalist economies have always had both types of capitals – the solid producers that do their part in the exploitation of workers and the parasites that feed on other capital – the progress of capitalist accumulation during the last fifty years has altered the ratio. Capitals have had to turn more to the second category, which has grown at the expense of the first category.

One "measure of financialization is the share of all corporate profits that the finance, insurance and real estate sector (FIRE) captured. Its share fluctuated around a mild uptrend from 1950 to 1980. Then in 1984 the percentage of profits taken by the FIRE sector began a steep increase until it reached an amazing high of more than 45 percent in 2001."¹²

Similarly, the technical and economic character of leading industries is summed up in the change from "Detroit" to "Silicon Valley."

Detroit was a sprawling complex that employed millions of workers. Silicon Valley is a handful of hothouses in San Jose, California and several other cities.

We cannot go here into what happened when capital accumulation completed its massive, industrial phase and entered into a so-called high-tech economy marked by the stagnation and decline of real wages, the erosion of job security, the rapidly escalating price of college, and dimming retirement prospects for the great majority of working people. (See this writer's *The Hollow Colossus*.) Suffice to say that financial capital and other varieties of the second category grew because opportunities for vigorous growth of the first category shrank.

This transformation increased tension and struggle within the capitalist class, too. It is not easy for outside capital to break into finance. Existing large capitals in finance have greater power to maintain themselves than in most industries. Modern technologies, too, are notable for a childhood of breakneck development and then a shakeout to a few winners. It happens more quickly than it did 150 years ago, and frequently one firm dominates its field almost absolutely (Intel, Microsoft, Apple, Google, Amazon, Facebook).

Each capital is compelled to concentrate more on its own gain and be less respectful of the common class interest – with consequences for the media industry and for the scramble to get government contracts, favorable regulation, and subsidies.

Inequality of income and the disappearance of relative mass prosperity eat away at a variety of public and semi-public institutions,

too. The income of the chief executive and a small circle around him swells to multiples of ten or twenty times the average wage of the employees instead of four or five times. Scramble for the top position undermines the mission of hospitals, school districts, colleges, museums, symphony orchestras, and so on.

The relative economic decline of U.S. imperialism also closes a field of dreams for the top echelons of government and society. Previously, projects to take over and exploit dominated areas all over the world brought loot that was shared among corporations, law firms, foundations, and so on. But the United States empire is not growing the way it did. The U.S. has had to turn toward purely military measures instead of initiatives like the Marshall Plan in postwar Europe and Kennedy's Alliance for Progress in Latin America. Back then the Ford Foundation provided cover for government maneuvers in the common class interest. By contrast, today the Clinton Foundation partially privatizes foreign policy, extracting bribes from ambitious local interests around the world in return for government decisions that might not be in the best interest of U.S. imperialism as a whole.

This account of the causes of the disintegration of bourgeois democracy is hardly complete. It is worth more study.

What Is the Socialist Path?

Whatever the historical bargain was, capitalism today has nothing more to offer. What are we to do? Setting aside the tactical matter of how to participate in the 2016 election, the

question is whether capitalism can be reformed, or must it be overthrown.

The classic debate between reform and revolution has gone on for 150 years. However, the terms have changed. It used to be, do we set a goal of revolution and organize for it, or shall big reforms be our goal? The latter, reformist view held that an extended series of gains would gradually and peacefully transform capitalism into a mixed economy and then socialism. A variant of the position said the reforms are all that count. If we have good wages, social security in retirement, guaranteed healthcare and the other components of a secure life, who cares whether it is under capitalism or socialism? The revolutionary retort was that gains under capitalism are fragile, are never as far-reaching as they need to be, and that capitalism is wracked by recurrent crises and generates one social evil after another. This opposition has typically been reflected in two kinds of parties, social democratic and communist.

The reformist path is no longer available. The last big legislative gains for working people in the United States were won in the 1970s: a package of consumer protections, workplace safety legislation, and freedom of information laws that are deservedly called the Nader reforms, after the great democrat with a small d, Ralph Nader. Nonetheless, the real median wage peaked in 1973. Mass struggle has continued, but the goal has been to stop takeaways and slow down the relentless erosion of our wages and conditions of life.

The left wing of the Sanders movement has begun to explore a social

democratic party. Glen Ford at Black Agenda Report recently observed, "There will be a number of new party start-ups and rivalries that will be sorted out in the usual, messy manner, but the general social democratic project will appeal to constituencies left of the corporate Democrats. ... At a statewide gathering of Democrats in Long Beach, California, members of the party's Progressive Caucus cheer when a speaker (me) predicts that a new, social democratic party will emerge from the tumult of 2016."¹³ Its method would be the legislative path. Therefore, electoral majorities must be put together. Typically, social democrats thunder about militant, mass struggle, "street heat" and so on, all funneled into legislative goals and campaigns for elective office.

Yes, such a party might emerge. In the past social democratic parties could win reforms. European parties did it in the middle of the twentieth century. That was a way to defuse the possibility of socialist revolution. Today, though,

capitalism will not grant significant reforms; its process of accumulation does not have the capacity for them. Now the duty of the social democratic party is to carry on the degradation of working people even as it spreads both false hopes and fear among them. A recent example is the Syriza party in Greece, which savagely administers pension cuts, repeals labor legislation, and privatizes the Piraeus port and other public assets.

Communists will elect some legislators if possible; it is another channel to speak to people. But to think that we will get major reforms through legislation is to live in the past. The only way is to organize for the overthrow of capitalism.

Comparison of Historical Experience

What is the socialist path? We should sharpen the question. What is *the difference* between the communist path and the social-democratic path?

<i>Went socialist</i>	<i>Did not go socialist</i>
tsarist Russia	Weimar Germany
China after Sun Yat-sen	France and Italy, end of WW2 and after
Cuba	Chile with Allende
U.S. in its era of disintegrating bourgeois democracy ?	

In search of answers it is good to study and compare historical experience. The accompanying chart lists several countries that went socialist and several that, despite large communist parties, did not go socialist.

Tsarist Russia had no bourgeois democracy, only a pretend parliament, the Duma. It became the first socialist country in the world. The Soviet Union destroyed feudal exploitation and capitalism and built a socialist economy. China, after the crumbling of its millennial dynastic system of agrarian rule and after the death of the bourgeois democratic revolutionary Sun Yat-sen, found a different path to revolution and renewing the whole society – a twenty-two year people's war against the Kuomintang regime and Japanese fascist invasion. Both communist parties understood that the existing state and economic system had to be destroyed. The liberated people built a socialist economy, starting from where they were. Cuba, one of the most dominated countries under United States imperialism and the barbarities of its client Batista, also found its distinctive way to the same end.

None of these communist movements were lured into an electoral path to socialism. The idea of such a thing in their countries was ludicrous and easy to reject. They did, however, need to overcome the defeatist Menshevik-Trotskyite view that a successful revolution could do no more than help a humane capitalism to develop in their largely pre-industrial societies.

On the other side, parliamentary democracy did exist in Weimar Germany from the end of World War One (and the defeat of a revolutionary

uprising in 1918) to 1933. The German monopoly capitalists, locked in desperate contention with British, French, and U.S. imperialism over petroleum, raw materials and markets, saw the Communist Party increase its votes in November 1932 while the Nazi total fell. The ruling class handed state power to Hitler. He crushed the communist movement with comparative ease.

Bourgeois democracy also existed in France and Italy after World War Two. As a result of the struggle against fascism, large Communist Parties headed armed partisan movements at the end of the war. The Communists laid down their arms, became mass electoral parties, and even took cabinet posts responsible for administration of capitalist government. The parties helped win reforms while they gradually lost all aspiration for socialism. Italy and France gave birth to so-called Euro-communism, which was a way station to minimal influence even as a social-democratic party.

Chile chose president Salvador Allende in an election that all sides concede was legitimate – with the support of the Communist Party of Chile. Allende attempted gradual socialist transformation of the economy. He thought it could be done without breaking up the old state machine, without the only alternative, a dictatorship of the proletariat. He did not get far before the local capitalists and the U.S. imperialists could not take it any longer. Who cared that Allende had won the election fair and square? They called in military officers who could be trusted to disregard the constitution. The disloyal sector of the armed forces carried out a bloody coup

in 1973. Allende shot himself in his presidential office rather than accept exile.¹⁴

Where will the United States go on the chart? Its economy and political culture are closer to the countries in the right column than to the ones in the left column. The paradox, though, is that the U.S. – hollowed out by deep problems of capitalist accumulation, the closing of the era of major reforms, and the disintegration of bourgeois democracy – has moved and continues to approach the conditions of tsarist Russia and old China. The most developed becomes the most rotten!

The path to socialist revolution in the U.S. will be something new in history. Nonetheless, it will be in the category defined by basic truths about the state and revolution. The challenge is to carry on class struggle so that every battle strengthens communism. A growing communist trend will, unlike hardy but small groups, cross the threshold of social relevance. The goal is not a party that gets millions of votes. Communists put forward their program and methods of action. They win the adherence of the people in tumultuous times. Together with the people they carry through the climactic struggles. They go on to construct a society where no one is poor, none are the rich, and everyone has good work creating a new world for humanity and nature.

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Notes

1. The phrase is inscribed on the facade of a public auditorium in Oakland, California. The building is closed while city officials and developers negotiate how to privatize the asset.

2. The "Establishment" is the overlapping circles of big capitalists, top corporate executives, major political figures in public and operatives behind the scenes, media owners, and the most listened-to policy intellectuals who serve them. See the books of William Domhoff.

3. This writer heard it from a credible source in the state.

4. Fred Thompson, the committee staff person who questioned Butterfield, went on to become a prominent right-wing public figure and senator from Tennessee.

5. Justice Breyer, 531 U.S., No. 00-949, Dec. 12, 2000, pp. 1, 15.

6. Tony Schinella, ["Debunking The Myth: Ralph Nader didn't cost Al Gore the presidency in 2000,"](#) February 25, 2004.

7. Ian Tuttle, ["Yes, Trump University Was a Massive Scam,"](#) *National Review*, February 26, 2016.

8. Stephen Kinzer, *The Brothers*, New York, Henry Holt, 2013, p. 125.

9. Nicholas Confessore and Amy Chozick, ["After Lying Low, Deep-Pocketed Clinton Donors Return to the Fore,"](#) *New York Times*, July 28, 2016.

10. ["Senator Bernie Sanders on Democratic Socialism in the United States: Prepared Remarks,"](#) November 19, 2015.

11. The automotive oligopolies got monopoly profits, too; small sweatshops are unable to retain a big chunk of the surplus value produced in their operations. Without debating the size and significance of the matter, we note that both sides of this transfer are capitals who exploit their "own" workers for most if not all their profit.

12. Charles Andrews, ["The Hollow Colossus,"](#) Needle Press, 2015, p. 67.

13. Glen Ford, ["Sanders Supporters Need to Split or Get Off the Pot,"](#) *Black Agenda Report*, June 22, 2016.

14. Greg Garcia, Jr., ["9/11/73: The 'Chilean Way' to Socialism Hits a Dead End,"](#) student thesis, Western Oregon University, 2012, p. 32f.

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