

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2017/03/31/oligarchy-in-america/>

Oligarchy in America

By Andrew Levine

March 31, 2017



Naming the System

In democracies, the *demos*, the people, rule; not social or economic elites. This was the understanding of philosophers in Athens twenty-five centuries ago, and it remained the consensus view well into the modern era.

The received wisdom was that, like anarchy, democracy is a theoretical possibility that can be instructive to reflect upon, but not an ideal that anyone of sound mind would actually endorse.

With the emergence of capitalist economic relations, however, and, along with it, the rise of the nation state, the traditionally marginalized *demos* became a factor in the politics of societies on the way to modernity.

In that context, democracy took on more positive connotations. The transformation was well underway by the time of the French and American Revolutions.

Enlightenment thought played a role in fashioning those world historical events and in promoting understandings of their significance. It was thanks to Enlightened thinkers that the idea took hold that nation states are comprised of citizens. The idea is that, in principle, basic rights and liberties should be distributed equally; that, within the political sphere, equality reigns.

Because it demanded the rule of only a part of the citizenry, the demotic part, the old understanding of democracy eventually gave way. In effect, the concept was scrubbed of its class content.

Needless to say, equal citizenship does not make social and economic inequalities go away. It does, however, establish a kind of political equality – at least in theory. In practice, self-described democracies have sometimes accommodated egregious political inequalities. This was what the civil rights movement in the United States was mainly about; and it has been, and still is, a major concern of feminists in the United States and around the world.

The standard understanding of political equality is formal, not substantive. Eligible citizens get one and only one vote, and are therefore formally or procedurally equal with respect to collective decision-making. That some citizens may have more influence in determining outcomes than others – not because they are more persuasive in deliberations, but thanks to their economic and social power – is not thought to offend the idea of citizenship as such.

Thus the rule of the *demos* became the rule of an undifferentiated citizenry; and we nowadays deem states democratic if they institutionalize free, fair, and competitive elections. Sometimes other practices associated with more traditional understandings of democratic theory are required as well — especially those that assure that the public is informed and that political choices are debated without fear or intimidation. However, these protections have more to do with liberal restrictions on what states can rightfully do than with democracy as such.

Because, in the real world, facts on the ground make the idea of rule by an undifferentiated citizenry seem ludicrously hollow, and because contemporary and traditional understandings of

democracy diverge so profoundly, it can be, and often is, misleading to use the word “democracy,” as we customarily do, to denote both classical and contemporary understandings.

But because the tables have turned, because the word “democracy” nowadays has positive connotations, defenders of the status quo are reluctant to give it up.

There have been theorists, however, who, being more concerned with getting concepts straight than with using them to justify the status quo, prefer not to contest the concept, but would rather reserve it for instances in which it plainly applies.

In practice, this means using “democracy” almost exclusively in normative contexts, and in discussing the work of the great democratic theorists of the past. It means acknowledging the fact that, for descriptive political science, the concept is as useless as the ancients believed.

Thus the late Robert Dahl suggested that instead of calling regimes like the one in the United States “democracies,” we ought to use the term *polyarchy* instead.

Etymologically, that word connotes the rule of the many. The “many” Dahl had in mind were overlapping elites. They need not all be based on wealth. In actually existing polyarchies – or “Western democracies,” as they are more familiarly known – organized labor and civil society groups of all sorts can and do figure in the political power structure too.

From the time of the Bolshevik Revolution to this day (in sectarian circles), hard Left political parties and unaffiliated leftwing intellectuals would distinguish themselves from one another by advancing competing views of the political economy and class nature of the former Soviet Union.

Maoists and some Trotskyists called the Soviet system “state capitalist.” There were many, not always compatible, views of what that notion implies. For Communists, the Soviet Union was a workers’ state. Orthodox Trotskyists agreed – but with the caveat that it was “bureaucratically deformed” to such a degree that Soviet Communism betrayed the ideals of the Revolution that gave it birth.

Building on the foundations Dahl laid, it is tempting to describe the political regime in the United States in a similar fashion. In that spirit, and at the risk of seeming facetious, I would venture that the United States is a polyarchy with plutocratic deformations.

In plutocracies, the rich rule. America’s plutocratic deformations are “exceptional,” compared to those of most other polyarchies, but they are not qualitatively different. In capitalist societies, capitalists are rich, and states in capitalist societies serve their interests. If only in this sense, the rich rule. In nearly all cases, however, they rule in more direct ways as well.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) insisted that a condition for the possibility of democratic governance is “that none should be so rich as to be able to buy another or so poor as to be forced to sell himself.” Nearly everyone agrees; the incompatibility of democracy with grossly unequal distributions of income and wealth is a tenet of both classical and modern democratic theory.

Polyarchies are democratic enough to be undone by gross inequalities too. All Western democracies are more polyarchic than democratic, and they all suffer, to some extent, from deformations brought on by income and wealth inequality. Neoliberal economic policies have made the problem worse everywhere.

However, the American polyarchy has suffered more than most; in the United States, plutocracy is out of control.

Of the many reasons why, perhaps the most important is the inability of the American state to limit political spending. The Supreme Court's infamous Citizens' United ruling nowadays gets all the attention, and it deserves all the blame it gets. It should be remembered, however, that this is only the latest in a series of Supreme Court decisions, going back at least to Buckley v. Valeo in 1976, that effectively identify political spending – and therefore political corruption – with Constitutionally protected speech.

Democracy Tamed

Until well into the nineteenth century, the political class in the United States, and its counterparts in Great Britain and elsewhere, restricted the franchise to white male property owners.

For determining how many representatives in Congress states would be allotted, slaves counted for three-fifths of a citizen. But they were not able to vote, of course; they were the property of their owners. Freed blacks fared no better.

Native Americans couldn't vote either; neither could many of the (mixed race) inhabitants of the lands the United States took from Mexico in the first half of the nineteenth century.

And although dissenting voices were raised from the earliest days of the republic, white women were denied the franchise too. The consensus view among men, and among many women as well, was that the rightness of that arrangement was too obvious to require justification.

The exclusion of propertyless white males was more problematic. There were plenty of extant justifications to draw upon, however. Property holders in Great Britain and their Western European counterparts had been dealing with the issue for some time, and the arguments were well worked out.

The general strategy was to take on board and then adapt the old arguments against the rule of the *demos* – especially the idea that for collective deliberation and decision-making to work properly, decision-makers must be educated and informed, and must have ample time to devote to deliberative processes. Propertyless white males, having neither the time nor the resources to develop the requisite capacities, fall short on this account.

This ostensibly high-minded rationale aside, the underlying reason why the franchise was restricted to persons of property was that the last thing property holders wanted was an electorate full of poor and desperate persons. They feared that the propertyless would use the power of the state to seize and redistribute their wealth.

Their fears were reasonable. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, wealth and income egalitarians did call for extending the franchise in order to advance their cause. The Chartists in Britain were the most important example, but they were not alone.

However, as the nineteenth century wore on, it became increasingly clear that the well off had little to fear. The rise of political parties that mediated between individuals and the state was an important part of the reason why. The party system that emerged enabled elites to channel popular aspirations in ways that left private property secure.

With its potentially counter-systemic implications neutered, democracy could finally serve as an ideal that everyone could, at least in theory, endorse.

Thus property qualifications proved less robust than racial, nativist and patriarchal restrictions of voting rights.

Under military protection, blacks could and did vote and hold office in defeated Southern states during Reconstruction. In short order, though, they were effectively disenfranchised for the next hundred years; and, to this day, in practice, if not in theory, their right to vote remains precarious.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, women did win the right to vote in a few Western territories and states, but it was not until 1920, after decades of struggle, that the women's suffrage movement finally succeeded in forcing Congress and the states to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment.

These victories notwithstanding, white supremacy and patriarchy survived extensions of the franchise in much the way that private property had decades earlier. It takes more than voting to dislodge entrenched power.

There is no doubt, however, that while progress has been uneven, the virulence of white supremacy and patriarchal domination has diminished over the past several decades. The gains seem irreversible too; not even the malign forces behind Donald Trump can turn back the clock on this. No doubt, voting is part of the reason why, though it is unclear how large a role it has played.

Ironically, though, over the same period, income and wealth inequality and other problems associated with plutocracy have gotten worse; voting hasn't helped with that at all. Indeed, many less well off voters nowadays vote for candidates and policies that make the problems associated with plutocratic rule worse. So much for expropriating the expropriators through the ballot box!

There are many reasons why this has happened: false consciousness comes immediately to mind; it is surely part of the explanation. For evangelicals and others with retrograde social views in the United States, so is "values voting."

But the most important part of the explanation, in the American case, is the lack of a real opposition party that the system in place does not thoroughly marginalize. The Democratic Party

is useless for that. To be sure, even Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have been known to mouth off about the evils of inequality. But you don't need a bullshit detector to see that they are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

The Trump phenomenon is both a symptom and a cause of this sorry state of affairs. It seems anomalous, because Trump's persona is so outrageous, and because it is plain that no one with his temperament should be anywhere near the seat of power, much less anyone as clueless as he.

It doesn't help either that his cabinet is full of nincompoops and that his advisors are even worse; or that, for the time being, he is pursuing reactionary social and economic policies at home, and a reckless and basically incoherent agenda in foreign affairs.

But the fact is that were he now to disappear from the scene – say, by getting himself impeached or by quitting, as he has done before in his capacity as a casino tycoon and real estate mogul — it will seem, in retrospect, that while, during his tenure in office, he raised the profile of the polyarchy's plutocratic deformations to new heights, he did not fundamentally alter the nature of the regime.

If, however, Trump somehow stays on – because his vanity demands it and because Democrats permit it – it may look instead, in retrospect, that, at this moment, we are indeed on the brink of a radical transformation; that our flawed polyarchy is about to become something America has never quite seen before, even in the robber baron days — a full-fledged oligarchy.

Oligarchy Trump Style

Oligarchy, the rule of the few, is the problem we are facing – not fascism. Trump is no fascist, not even a “friendly fascist,” as Ronald Reagan was sometimes said to be.

For one thing, he has no coherent political vision, fascist or otherwise; for another, he lacks the stature of a true fascist leader. Calling the Donald a fascist actually demeans fascism. This might seem like a good thing to do. But the description is anachronistic, and things are what they are. It would be foolish to trade off clarity for a dubious rhetorical advantage.

It is true, though, that Trump is a magnet for the kinds of people who, in the right circumstances, become fascists; social psychologists call them “authoritarian personalities.”

The description applies, however, only to a subset of Trump voters. Most of them were not so much voting *for* Trump as *against* Clinton and, insofar as they understood what she represented, against Clintonism – against the neoliberal turn, against liberal (“humanitarian”) imperialism, and against America's perpetual war regime.

The great German Social Democrat August Bebel called anti-Semitism “the socialism of fools.” In that spirit, we might say that “Trumpism is the anti-Clintonism of fools”; or rather that it would be, if saying that didn't require dignifying Trump's politics by putting an “ism” after his name.

Trump has unleashed the furies, the forces of darkness. Plenty of people – Muslims, Hispanics, persons of color, women, and white workers too – are suffering on this account, and if he isn't stopped, it will get much worse. Even so, he will not leave America a fascist state. The danger he poses to the political realm is of a different nature.

If he is able to ditch the largely beneficial rules and regulations he and his minions inveigh against, and if he can get Congress to enact the spending programs and tax cuts he says he favors, some very rich malefactors will do very well under his reign. Plutocracy will flourish.

But even allowing that, as “dialecticians” would say, quality arises out of quantity, this will not change the fundamental nature of the regime. America will still be a polyarchy — with large and growing plutocratic deformations.

It would be a regime changer, though, if Trump were to turn the rule of the many into the rule of the few. This is what he seems to be doing, right before our eyes.

He is not just forming a “kitchen cabinet” and relying upon it inordinately. He is relying upon people he thinks won't betray him, and turning the reins of government over to them.

However, his is no ordinary oligarchy. His oligarchs didn't find him; he found them. And, with one major exception, they aren't even plutocrats who have grown too big – or too rich – for their britches.

“Oligarchy” has had unusually bad press in the United States of late— thanks mainly to the resurgent Russophobia that Americans of a certain age imbibed with their mother's milk, and thanks to the fact that Democrats and their media flunkies are doing all they can to stir it up – not just to delegitimize Trump but also to deflect blame for the thrashing they took in the last election away from themselves and onto an enemy Republicans hate as much as they do.

Delegitimizing the Trump presidency is a worthwhile project, but there are less reckless ways of going about it than antagonizing a nuclear power. Inasmuch as Trump is his own best delegitimizing, there are countless ways.

Were left-leaning pundits to go after Trump for moving the country in an oligarchic direction, they would actually be doing some good. However, they prefer to go after him by linking him not to the homegrown oligarchs he is actually empowering, but to the oligarchs of Russia and the former Soviet republics, the evil “other.” That way they can get Trump and get Russia too.

Russian oligarchs and their counterparts in other former Soviet republics are, for the most part, well-connected cronies of leading politicians – especially Vladimir Putin, the man Democrats and Republicans of the John McCain variety love to demonize. The official line is that they reek of corruption; that our plutocrats are angels in comparison.

It is true that the Russian system is corrupt. The corruption started when, with Western – especially American – help, Russia's regression to capitalism got underway. At first, the

beneficiaries of that debacle were kleptocrats, connected to the old *nomenklatura* and, in some cases, to organized crime.

They made off like the bandits they are, setting the tone for what would follow as the system matured. The corruption has never gone away.

We in the United States have our share of corruption too. Trump fooled a lot of people campaigning against it; on the principle that it takes one to know one, he got them to think that, being on their side, he had the will and ability to “drain the swamp.” Where is Sarah Palin now that we need her to ask how that “swampy drainy thing” is going?

The way that it’s going is that he is bringing the swamp into the White House itself. He is doing it by putting together a kind of ma and pa oligarchy that does nothing to diminish the level of corruption and that is manifestly less competent than anything Russophobic liberal pundits can find to complain about in Russia today.

Reduced to its core, the Trump oligarchy is comprised of a Trump, a Kushner, Steven Bannon and, scariest of all, Robert Mercer.

The Trump is, of course, daughter Ivanka, purveyor of baubles and fashion. The line on her is that she is an intelligent and savvy businesswoman. In fact, she owes her success in business to the Trump name, and she knows as much about politics as the average thirty something who was born into the gilded world of the *nouveau riche*.

The Donald trusts her because she is family and because, as he would be the first to say, she is hot. Also, he needs her to be his acting First Lady.

I have high hopes, by the way, for the actual First Lady. Circumstantial evidence and common sense – supported by serious gossip – all suggest that she increasingly regrets the Faustian bargain she made with the Donald.

If she would do the right thing, Melania Trump could do more good for her (adopted) country than any woman with access to presidential genitals since Eleanor Roosevelt — more even than Monica Lewinsky or Nancy Reagan.

But for his dalliance with the former, Bill Clinton would have had a shot at ending Social Security “as we know it,” just as surely as he and Hillary ended Aid to Families with Dependent Children; and but for the latter’s faith in astrology and her and therefore her astrologer’s influence over the villainous old Gipper, all kinds of mischief would surely have resulted.

The Kushner is Jared, Ivanka’s husband. It was a match made in capitalist heaven. They both have sleaze ball dads who know how to work the system. They both grew up with more money than God.

A difference is that the Kushners couldn’t capitalize on their name, even if they wanted to, whereas the Trumps are past masters at it. Also Jared’s father, unlike Ivanka’s, has done time.

Another difference is that Ivanka's dad could care less about religion, except when his marks are evangelical Christians, while Jared's is an Orthodox Jew. So is Jared, and therefore now Ivanka as well. The Kushners are also rabid Zionists, ethnic cleansers whose "philanthropy" aids the settler movement in Occupied Palestine.

Two mediocrities; two chips off the old block. With oligarchs like these, how could Trump not "make America great again?"

Having identified a vacuum there to fill, Bannon, an apostle of the formerly fringe, now mainstream, far Right has managed to make himself Trump's guru.

He is the one largely responsible for bringing serviceable cartoon characters like Kellyanne Conway and Stephen Miller into the Trump fold. Without them and others of their ilk, Trump would now be little more than a barely remembered figure from a nightmare, and he would be even less able to govern than he currently is. Reince Priebus and Sean Spicer are just not enough.

Bannon can also be credited with bringing a semblance of ideological coherence to the Trump campaign by drawing on the thinking of pre-World War II clerical fascists and their intellectual descendants in Europe today. Their ideas give a nationalistic and Islamophobic coloration to the retrograde social and economic policies that Republicans traditionally champion.

How odd for a guru coaching a billionaire pretending to be an American "populist" to draw on sources rooted on the wrong side of the Dreyfus Affair, and for God-fearing, down home American Protestants not to mind the foreign and Catholic inflections. But there it is!

It was pointed out during the campaign that the adjective "loathsome" attached to Ted Cruz's name in much the way that "fleet footed" attached to Achilles'. Bannon picks up on the Cruz vibe too – especially when he echoes the old Reagan nonsense about how government is not the solution, but the problem.

To make his point, Bannon appropriated, and forever sullied, the word "deconstruction," depriving obscurantist literary theorists of one of their most cherished concepts. Bannon and therefore Trump say that they want to deconstruct the government by which they mean reduce it down to a vanishing point – all, that is, except those parts of it that advance the class interests of the Trump and Kushner families and their class brothers and sisters.

This would include its means of domestic repression and world domination. They want to expand all that – indeed, to throw money at it — even at the cost of offending the deficit hawks in the House and Senate, and in the larger Republican fold.

To soften the blow, Bannon and the others saw to it that those government agencies which actually serve the public would be led and staffed as much as possible by nincompoops opposed viscerally to the agencies they lead.

Even if Trump goes, this will be an enduring part of his “legacy.” With the Donald out of the picture, we would have Mike Pence, a bona fide reactionary, in charge. How pathetic that this is something to look forward to!

Then there is Mercer. If Jane Mayer’s scrupulously careful investigative reporting (“fake news” in the Trump lexicon) is even remotely on track, Mercer money has effectively bought the White House – not because the Donald is on the take, he doesn’t need to be, but because he is in way over his head and Mercer and his daughter Rebekah, are, under Bannon’s direction, helping him muddle through.

In his pre-Dick Cheney days, when he too would get in over his head, the man who is now only the second worst President in modern times would rely on Bush family fixers to get him through. Mercer is currently doing much the same for the man who knocked George W. out of first place.

Mercer, it seems, is weird as they come; daughter Rebekah, not so much. She reportedly relishes her power and influence as the First Lady of the alt-Right.

Her father, however, hardly ever speaks. In recent years, limitless riches seem to have brought out the inner Gatsby in the man. He has taken to indulging a taste for Long Island estates, luxurious yachts, and lavish parties. But even now, in comparison, Clarence Thomas, in his capacity as a Supreme Court Justice, is positively loquacious.

Mercer is an extreme libertarian and also a devotee not just of the usual conspiracy theories, but also of the idea that, for example, global warming is good for the planet and that nuclear accidents and even nuclear wars really aren’t that bad.

How could such a man become so rich and therefore powerful? The answer seems to be that, for writing computer codes useful to the financial firms he runs, he is something of an *idiot savant*.

Idiot savants who, for example, multiply and divide very large numbers in their heads end up in freak shows. What Mercer is uncannily good at is as socially useless. But it also happens to be ridiculously lucrative in our twenty-first century capitalist world.

And so Mercer and his daughter find themselves in a position to turn their fantasies into state policies that, thanks to their zeal and Trump’s fecklessness, could do irreparable harm to the human race and the planet itself.

All oligarchies are bad. The one that Trump is laying on us could make the others, even the Russian one that Democrats and their pundits rail constantly against, look good in comparison.