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<http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/12/21/structural-repression-americas-soft-fascism/print/>

Structural Repression: America's "Soft"-Fascism

By Norman Pollack
December 21, 2015

Collective absorption into a rotting system may appear volitional, therefore consensus, but in fact represents structural fascism, an historically evolving societal formation and framework of power in which all reference to peace, justice, economic and cultural democratization has been weakened if not eliminated from consciousness through a pounding, reinforced assertion and affirmation of CAPITALISM. Structural because seemingly self-evident and painless, while in reality the process of what amounts to ideological acculturation takes on a universal suffocative effect through every available means of manipulation/compulsion, from a patriotism generated by and associated with war to everyday symbols of national pride drumming home the theme of exceptionalism. The American, much as Steig's famous New Yorker cartoon of the individual trapped in his/her psychoanalytical cubicle muttering "People are no damn good," is boxed-in to a narrow epistemological space of adherence to total passivity, conformity, loyalty. Force is not ruled out to achieve political-ideological acquiescence in America, for much as in the way Marx describes the stage of primitive accumulation in Das Capital, the enclosure movement in seventeenth-century England (a superb example of structural repression), America has had its analogous situation of primitive accumulation in the bloody suppression of the labor movement, say, 1877-1938, from the railway strikes of the first bloody era, to the sit-down strikes of the New Deal, with countless local skirmishes in between: a formative context of state militias, government troops, and Pinkertons pressing down on working people to ensure unions (when permitted) would be safe (the Nazi parallel, soldiers-in-industry) and radicalism would be declared unacceptable and un-American.

Here we are, the close of 2015, after more than two centuries of the unquestioned ascendancy of capitalism, to all intents, an exclusively capitalist polity, the principal institutions of the social order, particularly government and the military, functioning solely on its behalf, to the point in which capitalism itself disappears within, and is identified as, the society's way of life. Hardness is the preparatory stage to softness, America as the macrocosm of Skinner's box conditioning the behavior of rats. We are rats dressed in the finery of a free people, dedicated however to stripping those of whom we disapprove of their finery (i.e., dignity as human beings) so as to become rats and no more—a de-legitimation of all things contrary to US demands, values, and expectations. Only some are coming to recognize that what we do to others establishes the precedent for doing the same to ourselves, chickens coming home to roost, as in the determined effort to cheapen labor while strengthening the economic-social bonds of upper groups to act in concert as a cohesive ruling group for the perversion of democracy and the negation of the social welfare.

It is all so simple and straightforward, a normalization of repression as translated somehow, via consumerism, sport, popular culture, into freedom, notwithstanding the narrow boundaries for its expression. Consider the presidential debates currently underway, in which the only thing distinguishing the parties is tone, not substance, a matter-of-fact acceptance of imperialism as America's right, and refusal to stare into the abyss of America's moral emptiness when it comes to employment, a living wage, medical benefits, the state of quality education for every child and opportunities to expand from there, all sacrificed to presumed exigencies of the Garrison State, a massive military budget destroying the vitals of civilized society. Militarization, too, is normalized as the nation's condition of existence, militarism the proudly proclaimed yet at the same time hidden motivating spirit because couched in the rhetoric of survival, righteousness, duty to God and country (a neatly-tied bundle of Exceptionalism). Barrington Moore's Harvard lectures on political sociology referenced what he termed "narcotization," the appeal of bread-and-circuses to keep the populace tractable, an idea not unlike Herbert Marcuse's, stated in, I believe, the epilogue to *Reason and Revolution*, the absorption of society's negativity, perhaps an Hegelian way of saying, all systems go in curtailing/destroying opposition to the System.

Soft Fascism, quotation marks removed because we have become reconciled to our condition of self-repression, even to the point of praising it Panglossian-fashion as the best of all possible worlds. How comforting to know that we can stare eyeball-to-eyeball with Putin and Xi in light of our immense nuclear arsenal, and if the Conflagration comes, so be it, we have always been right from the start! The morality of profound immorality, the reliance on force to achieve the Nirvana of ultimate peace—as in the collective death wish of a failed social order, returning us to my starting point: collective absorption into a rotting system. Look at those who represent "America's finest" in the political arena, jackals of despair who mouth platitudes of strength. Last night's Democratic debate (Dec. 18), the supposed opposition to all that Republicans hold dear, reflected instead a not-so-pale carbon copy of the latter's agenda, focused on terrorism as the magic bullet to hold up in order to frighten the American people, to subdue and quell all resistance to continued intervention abroad, similarly, alternative ways of thinking, governing, living, at home. Ironically, this psychological-ideological message hammered home incessantly is becoming increasingly unnecessary, the Pavlovian response having already been validated.

A Clinton-Trump presidential election in 2016 would represent rock-bottom in the confirmation of America's desire for continued unilateral global supremacy, a venture by both candidates to the precipice of total war for the sake of national honor (i.e., advanced-capitalist development). The US is largely responsible for the manufacture of terrorism through successive interventions in the Muslim world, only then to use terrorism as an ideological crutch for mounting universal political-economic expansion. The ultimate referent here is American capitalism, on which we can be sure Trump looks with favor, and, in the Democratic debate, we find Clinton using phony rhetoric to mask her own strong commitment to capitalism; for when asked, "Should corporate America love Hillary Clinton?", she replied, "I want to be the president for the struggling, the striving and the successful"—can't be done, when the successful are responsible for conditions creating the struggling. Hillary, above class, above party, desperately wanting to be loved by everyone as the formula for class reconciliation, the status quo, and the rule of upper groups. A close relation to Wall Street, clearly on a par with that of Trump, which despite his wealth may view him as unstable and unpredictable, provides her with the bridge for the execution of an aggressive military-foreign policy: little to choose between the two front-running candidates.

The politicization of terrorism by both parties brings McCarthyism up-to-date as 21st Century Americanism. We know ourselves by whom we hate, and who hates us. Ethnocentrism and xenophobia have perhaps never been so prevalent and popular in the American psyche than now, Muslims today in the minds of Americans becoming the equivalent of Jews in the minds of Germans in the 1930s—the demiurge of extermination lying just below the surface of political discourse. From Cruz's remarks on carpet-bombing to the remainder of the candidates of both parties, we see haste in showing who is fairest (i.e., toughest) of them all in fighting terrorism, a muscular appeal to the public quivering in fear. Patrick Healy, in his New York Times article, "Bernie Sanders Falls Behind in a Race Centered on Security," (Dec. 19), does not exaggerate in writing, "Americans are more anxious about terrorism than income inequality. They want the government to target the Islamic State more than Wall Street executives and health insurers. All of this plays to Mrs. Clinton's strengths—not only as a hawkish former secretary of state but also as a savvy politician who follows the public mood." I briefly alluded to America's race to the bottom, fear of terrorism greasing the wheels, and one can expect the other candidates, as in the Democratic debate and the Republic roster, to follow suit in a race to catch up or sprint to a glorious finish. The curtain descends on false consciousness, America's corporate-financial elite smiling in the wings.