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## The Democratic Swindle: Hillary or Trump?

By Luciana Bohne  
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“Do you think we would be better off under Hillary or Trump,” asked the members of my Writing Group, at the meeting first Sunday in October.

“It’s not an either/or matter. I can’t give you a short answer.”

But afterwards, I wrote the answer here.

We have political democracy in America but scarce economic democracy. We have the political structures of democracy, but they teeter on foundations of exceptions. These check the advance of genuine democracy from below. We have democracy for the few and exclusion for the many. We have socialism for capital and capitalism for the rest. Every political right or freedom, moreover, is provisional. It comes with clauses of exception in small print or loopholes accrued over time. These preserve the state's privilege to rescind them.

We have a democracy that contradicted itself from inception. It professed that "all men" were born equal, except those *un-people* who were legalized chattel—the property of men who bought them. This infant democracy, too, restricted the vote to men of property, encouraging ownership by theft of lands belonging to those other *un-people*—the native nations. That pattern of dispossession is evident today in the systematic violence against black youth. Black men are 6.6 percent of the population; they are 40 percent of 2.3 million of the incarcerated population, up from 375,000 in 1970. Six million citizens who have served their sentences are not allowed to vote.

### **The nature of our democracy**

Property, not the *demos*, was engineered as the *nec plus ultra* of vital interests into the DNA of our constitutional machinery. Ostracism waved the semaphore on top of the shining hill of white post-colonial America. We seized, we owned, we profited, or we didn't belong to the utopian enclave—the exalted den of zealous profiteers.

The ethic of greed and competition hardly insures social harmony. It is secured by buying public opinion. This means building a superstructure of ideological control. It means conditioning the public to adopt as their own the values and interests of the ruling elite. Therefore, the inculcated belief in the sanctity of property induces the ruled to believe that "the pursuit of happiness" consists in the acquisition of material goods—not, as understood by the thinkers of the Enlightenment, the acquisition of the right to self-development, denied under the rigid social structures of feudalism.

The notion of property in capitalism predicates exploitation. It is not the guarantee of public welfare, harmony, and security. Property is the mother of racism, war, genocide, and inhumanity. We have, in our huckster democracy, good citizens who oppose war and racism, but opposing wars and racism in a property-obsessed state is like opposing the fire in Hell. Fire is the nature of Hell as property is the nature of our state. We must call for abolishing Hell.

"It is quite obvious," wrote the young Frederick Engels in his first published book, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, observing the emerging democracy of the industrial age in England, "that all legislation is calculated to protect those that possess property against those who do not."

### **The swindle**

When you have political democracy without economic justice, you have form without content. Karl Marx, who with Engels studied the emerging constitutions of liberal Europe, especially

after the revolutions of 1848-49, wrote it all up in *The Holy Family*, and called this vested, partial democracy, “the democratic swindle.” He considered the US the model country of this “swindle,” the most democratic in constitutional form, the most effective for regulating the people’s passions within the limits of ruling class interests, insuring social peace in the vise of its brutal liberal embrace.

To be sure our constitution was the most democratic of the emerging liberal age.

In Europe, for example, nascent liberal constitutions were blighted by a reactionary impulse toward the preservation of degrees of despotism. Not ours. In writing, we repudiated kings and despots. We were “we the people.” We ruled. We had graduated from subjects to citizens.

It was a brilliant hoax, the illusion of power resting with the people. “For god’s sake, let them vote; don’t be afraid of elections,” whispered the US elites to their fretful counterparts in Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. “Let them warrant their own subjection with the vote. Let them think they rule the state. You will have social harmony at a cheaper rate than you do now with the expenditures on dungeons and gendarmes.”

Europe listened because the socialist movements took off in massive earnest at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, demanding social and economic justice. They listened because international socialism threatened to unite in common struggle against imperialism the subject peoples of the colonies with the subject masses in the imperial motherland. The laboring masses of Europe realized that if the sun never set on the British Empire, it never rose on British slums.

To reassert social harmony, concessions were made. Then the socialist movement was wiped out in the First World War, both a class and an inter-imperialist war. The rising tide of consciousness of general oppression subsided and crashed on the mud of Flanders and the trenches of the Western front. On the Eastern front, the tide held, wiped out autocracy in Russia, and began the experiment of people’s rule. One thing the imperialists did not take into account when they egged on the people of each nation to kill the people of the other was the reflection that wars are the crucible of revolution. If there is a silver lining in the ongoing butchery of today’s wars by the West against post-independence colonial places it is the hope that history will repeat itself in a blow-back of global revulsion and revolt.

### **Neoliberalism sets in**

Since 1945, the American two-party system succeeded brilliantly in maintaining a controlled social order, playing a game of pretend conservative and progressive opposition. In reality, the game was played to confine the people to a political closet of stiflingly narrow proportions, a suffocating space of political choices, in which all the people were expected to do was face-off over whatever trivial or expense-free concession the state threw at one group or the other. Keep them agitated but leashed; give them the impression that in dissenting and debating, they live in a free society. This is how the rulers liked it: the people divided but hemmed in. True, occasionally the people broke out and took to the streets, but minimal concessions were made, and they returned to the closet to squabble over their merits or demerits.

In the 1970s, the rulers made a momentous decision. They noted that the rate of profit on investments within the welfare state was flat. They noted that maintaining the industrial economy had too many overhead costs. They noted that concessions made to insure social harmony had accumulated to a tipping point at which the freedom of capital to expand was at risk. They decided to take it all back: the industrial investment in the country's continuing development; the progress of workers' rights; the cost of social services; the regulations on banking; the restrictions on financial schemes and gambles. In short, they wanted the pre-Great Depression undisciplined Wall Street casino back.

They knew they were embarking on social warfare. They knew the people would suffer, but they trusted that the ravages of neoliberal scorched-earth policies would take time to bite home. The predictable revolt against pauperization could be delayed by retribalizing society into identity groups, each seeking the attention of the state to a single issue. We became a nation of Balkanized minorities because the state knew that our strength—our only weapon—was united in numbers. Atomized, we could be dealt with

When in the late 1970s, the steel industry left Pittsburgh for Brazil, though the rate of profit was 12%, the area was economically devastated. Teaching composition 90 miles north of Pittsburgh, I read essays in the 1980s from students at the working-class public university where I taught. The essays told heart-wrenching stories of family's distress—steelworker fathers who lost their jobs, drank, quarreled with wives, divorced.

More painful to read, however, were the causes the students attributed to the insecurity of their young lives. They cited too stringent environmental laws; excessive corporate taxation; union greed. They surrendered their reason to the passion of resentment which the Republican Party stoked using the cudgel of racism. They supposed democracy had gone too far with Affirmative Action, favoring one group over another. They agreed that "government was too big" and welfare too lavish. The philistines in the Republican Party compensated their misguided trust with pedantic lucubrations on family and religious values, the "sanctity of life," the sobriety of the death penalty as social discipline—measures that did not deplete the defense budget or the corporate subsidies by a single cent. The prison complex became a lucrative site for private investment and exploitation—the Workhouse of the British 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Democratic Party, meanwhile, preached racial tolerance but passed draconian laws incarcerating the most vulnerable—the young, the poor, and disproportionately black. They "reformed" welfare, and led resentful whites to believe that uppity blacks were losing their handouts. In reality, most people on welfare were poor whites. The Democratic Party launched the discourse of multiculturalism, ghettoizing social groups by single-issue politics, which further fractured social cohesion, solidarity, and cooperation.

What lay buried under the discourses of values and identity was class, the unmentionable, the proscribed. The American working class ceased to exist as a linguistic entity in public and intellectual discourse. It ceased to exist politically, because when language dies, the people's history, culture, and consciousness die, too. So the Democrats passed NAFTA and CAFTA, acts of economic aggression against labor at home and abroad. They repealed the Glass-Steagall Act to throw the door open to untrammelled financial license, which gave us the crash of 2007-8,

when the bullshit of both parties finally hit the fan. The hitherto divided and apathetic polity broke out in a chorus of irate rage against “the rich.” Here was the political backwardness of the American people, so assiduously cultivated by both parties, awakening to a perception of class as a social relation of unequal power in society.

### **Social harmony breaks down**

In this year’s presidential electoral campaign, we’ve seen the grip of control by both parties loosening. The halcyon days of class conciliation and of cooperation by the working population with the interests of economic elites have clearly come to some sort of beginning of the end. The somnambulist voters who had formerly lined up behind the candidate selected by their respective parties—Republicans to the fake right, Democrats to the fake left—suddenly woke up, broke out of their apathy in disorderly, riotous, unexpected disobedience.

Twelve million voters joined the campaign of “independent” Senator Bernie Sanders, who offered himself as the candidate of democratic socialism. 13.3 million became partisans of the billionaire real estate entrepreneur Donald Trump, the upstart rogue candidate of the Republican Party. In reality, neither candidate acknowledged the magnitude of the problem of world capitalism in crisis, the root cause of the return to rapacious capitalism, advanced by neoliberalism. Neither grasped or confessed to grasp that neoliberalism was a necessity for capitalism’s survival. Thus, both proposed to set the clock back to a time when the American people prospered, Sanders to the economics of the New Deal; Trump to the days of industrial Fordism, two options specifically trashed by neoliberal economics. Hillary Clinton, as Bill Clinton’s partner in neoliberal ideology and practice, does understand that neoliberalism is the last battle for the global hegemony of international capital. That is why she’s the candidate of the Bush Neo-Cons.

But the people, driven by their increasingly dire material conditions, had finally had enough. The Obama years had put paid to any hope for change—to any lingering trust in the promises of both parties. The wars continued and intensified, raising the defense budget to over 600 billion dollars; the military-industrial complex garnered riches to raise the envy of Croesus; surveillance intensified; the banks recovered and profited, while the people chewed on the crumbs of austerity; the export of capital rushed out of a country badly in need of investments; the job market offered precarious, insecure, and underpaid work; the anti-labor, anti-sovereignty international trade deals pressed on. Corruption. Police violence. Scapegoating immigrants—and massive deportations. Media control. Lies. Belligerence. Destructive foreign policy: military aggression and regime change. Shredding of international law and treaties. Fake humanitarianism. Loss of the “good opinion of the world,” which the Constitution so anxiously bid the people of the United States to cultivate. In lieu of good neighbors, our rulers aspire to become abusive landlords of the globe.

The people are ashamed. In some corner of their darkening conscience, they are ashamed of their country. Increasing poverty strips them of their dignity. They must feel shame for the conditions of their private and national lives. And that is not good for the rulers: shame is an emotion where revolutionary consciousness begins. Who can live long without self-respect before resorting to revolt or succumbing to loathing humanity so as to displace self-loathing, as fascists do? Above

all, who can live long in a society where endemic violence is a clear symptom of its doleful absence of love?

## Conclusion

Trump or Hillary? Wrong question. Rather, we need to realize that in so far as it is the choice the leaders propose, it is a trap, which now we cannot escape but from which we can take instruction for the future. In the liberal culture in which we have all been educated—Republicans or Democrats— we are used to looking for saviors from above. We attach ourselves to the powerful. We look upward for emancipation, but radical change and democratization come from below. That’s where the hardness is, but that’s what scares us. We are soft because we don’t know our own strength, and as long as we don’t know it, we are subjects—not citizens.

We should see in both the Trump and the Sanders partisan defections from the mainstream parties the glimmer of a potential—in fact, a necessity— of organizing a party of the people. We could even call it Party of the Basket of Deplorables, for if we exclude the “messy masses” (the term Marx and Engels used, to mock the contempt in which they were held by the arrogant elite), we admit that democracy hasn’t a prayer. They are “messed up,” but are they to blame, who have ceased to matter, or even exist, on the front of the class war that has been launched *against* democracy—that is, against us all?

The color line must be erased. That is an imperative for unity. In America, racism is the endemic, the recurring plague. It is the root of our political disunity. So that is the first task: educate it out of existence. Engels, who shared his life with Mary Burns, Irish Republican radical, well understood the racism against the Irish pervading the English working class. This was no mere psychological disorder. It arose because the manufacturers of the Midlands imported Irish labor as scabs to break strikes. Nevertheless he saw in the English working class the strength required for a social revolution:

“England exhibits the noteworthy fact that the lower a class stands in society and the more ‘uneducated’ it is in the usual sense of the word, the closer is its relation to progress and the greater is its future.”

I have tried “to patiently explain”—Lenin’s maxim—and, in the length of the explanation that is not even a “straight” answer, I may have exhausted the reader’s patience, but it is important to know, that if we vote for either of the two candidates, we do so without the illusion that elections give us power. If we vote for the “lesser evil” let it be for the last time, for evil it will be.