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“It’s the System, Stupid!” The Underlying Causes of Trump’s Victory



Photo by [The Now Time](#)

In 2016 Steve Bannon told Donald Trump that if he played his cards right, he could become

“the Roosevelt of the Right.” That is, he could create a coalition of ultra-wealthy capitalists, small entrepreneurs, and discontented workers and bind them together under the flag of cultural nationalism. The key to doing this was to campaign against “the System” – not the system of capitalist oligarchy, of course, but the structures of administrative regulation, relatively free trade, and military commitments abroad that

defined what Trump and Bannon called the “Deep State.” They key to their electoral success was to cast MAGA as the movement of systemic change and the Democrats as the party of the status quo – a trap into which the supporters of Biden and Harris easily fell. If Trump took steps toward becoming the Roosevelt of the Right, the Democrats looked more and more like Herbert Hoovers of the Left.

The pain and suffering inflicted on defeated Democrats and independent liberals by the train wreck of November 5th is real and understandable. That many of them have learned very little from this experience is revealed each night on CNN and MSNBC, whose anchors and guests can’t stop complaining about Trump’s rude attacks on established bureaucratic practices and foreign policy norms. For example, they repeatedly call him a “felon,” unwilling to admit that trying to use the judicial system to discredit him was not only a failure but a serious political mistake and a diversion. Liberals turn to the courts when they are losing the battle for hearts and minds in the streets, workplaces, and legislatures. Unfortunately, Stormy Daniels did not supply them with a program to win back the alienated working class.

What did the voters want?

Exit interviews and other analyses reveal that those who voted for Trump or didn’t vote at all were reacting to two major problem-sets, one socioeconomic, the other ethnocultural. The *socioeconomic* issues included high prices and stagnant wages, growing personal debt, lack of opportunities to get ahead, the impact of deindustrialization and automation, skyrocketing inequality, and feelings of being abandoned and disrespected by the “elites”. The *ethnocultural* problems involved perceived threats to people’s identities as Americans, males, whites, Christians, non-college educated workers, Arab-Americans, country people, or members of other groups sensing a decline in their status and opportunities relative to those of more favored groups.

What would it take to solve problems like these? Clearly — or so it seems to me — these are *structural* problems requiring changes in existing socioeconomic and ethnocultural systems. But the Democrats licking their wounds would rather debate whether Kamala Harris lost because she was too progressive, as conservatives or centrists say, or because she wasn’t progressive enough, as Bernie Sanders and others on the Left believe.

The answer, I’m sorry to say, is “both.”

With respect to socioeconomic issues, Harris was not progressive enough. She pointed to reforms adopted by the Biden Administration that were helpful to working people but not remotely adequate to solve the underlying problems causing mass insecurity and

suffering. Harris would not even commit to increasing taxes on the super-rich – but, if she had, she would still have had a credibility deficit. This is because the measures advocated by progressives like Sanders – reforms such as taxing the rich and raising the minimum wage – do not have the power to correct major structural malfunctions related to deindustrialization, automation, or even the challenge of low-wage immigration. More radical change is needed.

What sort of change? Consider the undocumented worker issue, so potent in influencing even the votes of Hispanic Americans. The economists agree that the U.S. has a serious labor shortage – but low-wage immigration clearly undermines the income levels of low-wage workers living in the same region. This problem could be mitigated, even eliminated, by adopting the sort of economic planning, with input from local communities, that would permit the government to guarantee high-wage jobs and public welfare subsidies in areas of high immigration. But so long as progressivism as defined by Democratic neoliberals excludes the possibility of serious economic planning and collective action, the Dems will be incapable of offering credible solutions to the real problems of our market-driven system.

What about the ethnocultural problems – the identity-based insecurities and ambitions mentioned earlier? Some say that, with regard to these issues, the Harris campaign was *too* progressive, in the sense that, in addition to economic reforms, it advocated women’s reproductive and workplace rights, racial equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and protection of the interests of other marginalized groups such as undocumented workers and prisoners. But the problem is not that liberals fight for the rights and interests of historically oppressed groups. It is that, by accepting the zero-sum rules of the existing oligarchical system, they declare less oppressed groups to be “privileged” and lump them in with elite oppressors. Not surprisingly, this threatens and alienates groups that are only *relatively* privileged, and who are actually potential allies against the oligarchy and its political camp followers.

Let’s be clear about this. The historic oppression of some groups, continuing into the present, is a fact. It is also a fact that systemic oppression to some extent benefits everyone who is not a member of the most oppressed group. For example, the cheap cotton produced by slaves provided jobs for white workers in the clothing industry as well as consumer goods for everyone who could afford them. But to be white rather than Black, male rather than female, straight rather than gay, gives straight white males only relative advantages over the members of more oppressed groups. It clearly does *not* relieve them of oppression by far more powerful elites. In fact, their relative superiority

over other groups is part of a sleazy divide-and-conquer game used by those with oligarchical power to keep them in line.

People do not live “by bread alone”; even if relatively comfortable, they will fight to defend the existence and interests of the groups they strongly identify with. Even so, it seems undeniable that socioeconomic struggles and precarity incline many of those suffering either to challenge more powerful groups or to seek scapegoats among groups considered their social inferiors or pariahs. MAGA’s identification of immigrants as rapists and criminals was a classic exercise in such scapegoating.

Cui bono? Who benefits from such a conflation of economic and moral threats? Of course, those at the top of the socioeconomic ladder would much rather have troubled workers and insecure middleclass folks punching down than punching up! The MAGA movement thrives on this dynamic, and the Democrats do not yet seem to understand that the way to challenge it is not just to defend the interests of the most downtrodden groups but to relieve their suffering – and that of the slightly less downtrodden – by punching up!

The enemy is the oligarchy

How to punch up? Consider that our political system offers voters a choice between two parties, one more “liberal” and the other more “conservative,” both of which claim to represent all classes of Americans, from workers and small entrepreneurs to the great capitalists who control our key financial, manufacturing, communications, and service companies. The roughneck working on an oil rig and Elon Musk in his Austin, Texas compound are both Republicans. The scholarship student at a march against genocide and the CEO of Lockheed Martin are both Democrats. Some bargaining between the elements of each party coalition is permitted, but the masters of the economy maintain and modify the basic rules of the game. So, whichever party citizens vote for, the wealthiest, most powerful groups in our society remain in the driver’s seat. Whichever party is elected, the solutions to certain problems that might alter the system to the elites’ disadvantage are automatically placed out of bounds, and thinking seriously about them becomes taboo.

Consider the weapons industry. Producing weapons and weapons delivery systems is the healthiest, most profitable sector of the U.S. manufacturing economy. The military-industrial complex is an oligarchical industry, with profits guaranteed by the government, that kills millions of people and destroys property around the globe. Suppose that you don’t like this situation and want to slash the military budgets and redirect this production to peacetime uses. Forget it! You will be called irresponsible, pro-Russian, pro-Chinese, AND anti-worker, since you will be threatening jobs as well as investments. The

Democrats will be as opposed to your proposal as the Republicans – if not more so. This is because the same oligarchs owning the same or related companies and financing the careers of the same or related politicians set the rules and define the limits of permissible discussion in both political parties.

What is vicious about this is not merely that elite power makes a farce of democracy, but also that it continually generates solution-less problems. Thus, we export weapons of destruction as if there were no possibility of converting military production into a program to produce goods and services to satisfy basic human needs. We fight over immigration as if there were no such thing as a planned economy capable of remedying our labor shortage without lowering wage rates and bankrupting social services. And we choose sides in disputes between relatively oppressed and less oppressed identity groups as if there were no way to reduce competition between them for unnecessarily scarce resources and economic opportunities.

What James Carville might say, if he understood the situation better, is “It’s the system, stupid!” If we do not recognize that it is the system of capitalist oligarchy and its political servants that limit the possibilities of conflict resolution and generate most of this discontent, we will keep fighting unnecessary battles that Democrats are unlikely to win against a movement that claims (however falsely) to be anti-system.

In a nutshell: the Republican victory of November 5 was not a rejection of the Left – it was the result of a vacuum on the Left. The MAGA Republicans allowed themselves to consider forms of change that many consider taboo, for example, making radical cuts in federal regulatory agencies. These changes will make the plight of working people worse, not better, but they point in an instructive direction. Those on the Left must also permit themselves to consider forms of system change that are now taboo.

Critics may brand proposals to reconstruct a destructive neoliberal system “socialist,” “communist,” “anarchist,” or what have you, but if they point the way to shifting power from the oligarchs to the people, working people will respond positively. They are already anti-system. The challenge now is to make it clear to everyone that Trumpism is nothing more than a disguise for oligarchical tyranny, and that we can only control the economy by owning it and operating it collectively.

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