Liberal Illusions and Delusions

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Contents

Another Liberal Illusion 4
The Democrats 5

Facing the Trump regime, there are several different liberal delusions (although these views are also held by many who regard themselves as radicals). One is to see Trump as leading pretty directly to fascism and another believes that Trumpism does not really represent a major change in U.S. politics.The view that the U.S. is approaching fascism is based on an unrealistic expectation that the U.S. government is—or at least ought to be—a fair and open democracy, as portrayed in high school civics classes.

Instead, many people are shocked—shocked!—when the state acts in an undemocratic, unjust, and authoritarian manner (I am not thinking of young people, new to politics, but to older people who should know better). *What, the government lies to us!Elections are distorted and votes are suppressed! African-Americans are killed by police at random! Public opinions (on gun reform or the environment) are ignored by elected "representatives"—who are really agents of the wealthy! The government attacks people in countries with which the U.S. is not at war! And so on.* Therefore the conclusion is often reached that the U.S. is undemocratic and on the road to fascism, or perhaps is already fascist.

On the contrary—**this is what capitalist democracy looks like.** It is a system, which serves the interests of the capitalist class and its systemic need for capital accumulation. *"The three wealthiest people in this country own more wealth than the bottom half of American society. The top one-tenth of one percent now owns as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent."* (Bernie Sanders in an interview with John Nichols for **The Nation** 4/2018; p. 4.) How could such an arrangement permit true democracy? Instead, the system of representative democracy permits factions of the capitalist class to fight out their differences and make decisions.And it fools the mass of working people into thinking that they really control the state—that they really are free.

At times things have been worse.The '50s were part of the "golden age" of capitalism, the prosperous years following World War II. They were also the years of the anti-communist hysteria and McCarthyite witch-hunt.Thousands of leftists were persecuted, jailed, or thrown out of their jobs in government, universities, public schools, unions, entertainment, and other private businesses.Meanwhile, the whole of the South was under legal segregation, the vicious oppression of African-Americans. This was enforced by the law and by the terror of the Klan.The anti-communist repression and the legal Jim Crow laws were defeated by the 70s.This was done by the massive struggles of African-Americans and by the movement against the war in Vietnam, and other efforts.

There has since been a rightist backlash. This includes the rise of a real fascist movement, one that aims to overthrow bourgeois democracy and replace it with a political dictatorship.Trump has encouraged these people to come out into the light.However, the neo-Nazis, Klanspeople, and advocates of a theocracy are still a small minority, even of Trump's followers.All parts of the establishment, including businesspeople, high military officials, and leading Republicans have denounced them.There has not been an effort to cancel elections, establish a president-for-life, ban all but one political party, outlaw unions, throw political radicals into concentration camps, legally persecute Jews, LGBT people, and women, and reinstall African-American slavery.That is what fascism would really be, and it is not what we are currently facing.Claiming that we are confronting an immediate fascist threat from Trump weakens us when we deal with real fascists.

Another Liberal Illusion

This may lead to the other illusion.Since Trumpism isn't fascism, then perhaps it is nothing new or important. The vile Trump is then seen as an accidental president with personal peculiarities.Therefore he will be defeated in 2020 (if not impeached before that). Then U.S. politics will return to "normal."Hopefully a moderately liberal Democrat—or at least a not-crazy Republican—will be elected.Progress marches on.

This approach ignores what is new and dangerous in U.S. politics.Just as, in regard to climate change, we are not facing immediate ecological catastrophe, but **there is no more "normal weather."** So, in politics, we are not facing imminent fascism, but there are no more "normal politics."Since the early 70s, the post-World War II prosperity has ended, and the overall direction of the world economy has been toward stagnation in real production, growth of empty financial and speculative "wealth", increased inequality within and between nations, and limited and fragile growth even in the "up" phase of the economy.In order to keep and expand profits, the bourgeoisie has attacked the world working class, in various ways.In the U.S.A., the main political instrument of this attack has been the Republican Party. Now completely controlled by far-right reactionaries ("conservatives"), it has become the cutting edge of the assault on the working class, as well as on women, African-Americans, Latinos/as, LGBT people, and the environment.

In 2008, much of the public was fed up by eight years of George W's Republican administration.The capitalist class gave them someone apparently different, the first Black presidential candidate.Besides electing Obama, the Democrats expanded their majorities in both congressional houses. In reaction, the Republican response did not seriously try to increase their voting base. For example, they could have tried appealing to the increasing population of Latinos/as. But such an appeal would antagonize their existing base of nativist-racist white people, even if this sector was declining in population. And there was a limit as to how much they could appeal to the voters, since their real program of cutting taxes on the rich and cutting benefits for working people had only limited attraction. So instead they sought to build in political control, to "rig the game".

With an unprecedented flood of money, they mobilized their racist, nativist, fanatical base of white, middle class and upper working class people, especially men and especially evangelicals. Republicans whipped up sexual hysteria over abortion choice or rights for homosexuals and trans people.The dupes were organized, through the Tea Party and such, to take over state legislatures. *"Their plan [was] to remake America not from DC down, but from the statehouse up."* (William Barber, **The Third Reconstruction.** 2016; xiv) They won control of the majority of state governments. There they expanded efforts to suppress votes among People of Color, youth, and women. Also a very conscious plan was carried out to gerrymander the voting districts of each state, to give the Republicans a big advantage.Democrats had gerrymandered too, in the past, but the extent and the methods (using computer maps) were unusual.This was not a particularly secret strategy (see the history in Joan Walsh, "The 7,383 Seat Strategy" **The Nation** 4/2018). Meanwhile a huge right-wing media machine was created, from radio, to Fox television, to the Internet.

These methods did not mean that Democrats could not defeat Republicans in elections.But it became much harder, requiring more effort and more money.There was an extra pull to the right, so that Democrats needed to be more "moderate," less "liberal," to have a chance of winning in the biased political system.

By 2017, the Republicans controlled 32 state governments. If they get control of two more states, they would have the legal power to call a constitutional convention—to alter the U.S. constitution. They have actually discussed this in conservative circles. If they reached this threshold of power, they would not set up a one-party dictatorship. They do not have popular or elite support for this.But they could gut the power of the national government to regulate business, to protect the environment or labor, or to enforce various democratic rights.

The Democrats

Many liberals believe that the republic can be saved by impeaching Trump.No matter how many illegal, unconstitutional, or immoral things Trump has done, it is impossible that he could be impeached so long as the Republicans hold majorities in both houses of Congress.The current Republican Party is so corrupt that it has done its best to derail and discredit the investigations into Trump's activities.Even their supposed super-patriotism has wilted under Trump's connections with Russia.Therefore passing a bill of impeachment would require a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives—which is quite possible. Then actually expelling Trump would require a two-thirds majority of Democrats and "moderate" Republicans in the Senate—which is highly unlikely. Polls generally show that most U.S. citizens, including Democrats, are opposed to impeachment.This makes support for it unlikely among Democratic politicians from "purple" states, let along "moderate" Republicans.Historically, only two presidents were impeached (in the House) but neither was expelled (by the Senate). And suppose impeachment did work. The result would be… President Mike Pence! Perhaps the shakeup would be another sign that the system was in crisis, but…all that effort for so little effect.

The biggest illusion of the liberals is that the attack on the people by the Republicans can be beaten back by supporting the Democratic Party. The whole of U.S. politics exists to channel discontent into one or the other of the two big parties.Both are supporters of capitalism and the national state, both rely on big money contributions, both seek to ingratiate themselves with sectors of big business, and both are the enemy of the working class and most of the rest of the population.

The already cited article by Joan Walsh of **The Nation** reports on efforts by rebellious people, new to political action, to work through the Democrats. However, she notes a problem: *"The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and the Democratic Legislative Committee—as well as state-party operations and legislative-caucus groups—all come to function as incumbent-protection committees…[causing] the party's failure to reach out to its grass roots, especially at the state level…"* (4/18; p. 17)She reports on valiant attempts of women, youth, and others to break through the old-timers establishment.But even if these efforts were to succeed, basic problems would continue.

What drives people to the Democrats is the horrible failures of the Republicans.But what has driven people to the Republicans has been the horrible failure of the Democrats. After eight years of a Democratic president (which had included two years of a Democratic majority in Congress), there was still so much suffering and stagnation that a bombastic demagogue could appeal to a great many people.Even the best of the left-liberal Democrats (the Warren-Sanders wing) has no real answers to the decay of capitalism.If people swing to the "left," to throw out the Republicans,

the Democrats will be unable to improve things significantly—and there will be another swing back to the right.

As the anarchist Paul Goodman said in the ‘sixties, even a huge electoral swing to the Democrats, even to their liberal wing, would come up against *“the massiveness of the status quo and its established powers, venal, blimpish, police-ridden, prejudiced, and illiberal, officially existing in the Pentagon, the Treasury, the FBI, the Civil Service…a large part of congress.”* (Paul Goodman, “The devolution of democracy”; **Drawing the Line** 1962; 62) Today we can add the continued existence of far-right organizations, funded by big money, and far-right media.Even with a swing to the “left” (if the Democrats may be called that), there will still be 30 to 40 % of the population which lives in a crazed far-right fantasy bubble, supporting Trump or, at least, Trump-like politics.While only a minority of these people are outright fascists, they still amount to about one out of every three U.S. citizens—a lot of people. Meanwhile the decay of capitalism goes on (even during the current limited “recovery”) and the attack on the working class continues by the whole capitalist class, including its “liberal” wing. Gainsmay still be won, but only limited ones.

These forces cannot be defeated by politics as usual, by rushing into the Democratic Party, or by running in elections. They need to be met by independent mass direct action by working people and all oppressed. Anarchists and other radicals need to raise maximal programs of opposition to the whole rotten system, in all its economic, political, environmental, and cultural aspects. As Goodman concluded his already cited essay, *“If…catastrophe [is to be] prevented, we must do it by action outside of their politics, by every means and on every relevant issue.”* (77)

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