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| The USC4P&J Occasional Papers  are a series of ad hoc publications on the themes of peace and justice. The series comprises informal  essays, declarations, papers in progress, and talks or contributions to meetings and assemblies. |

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| This talk was given by **Lucas Alden** on 11/17/2016 at a Rome chapter of ARCI,  a national cultural association operating in Italy. Besides USC4P&J, the public included various activist organizations such as Rete NoWar - Roma, AEPC  Rome and Democrats Abroad (the US Democratic Party’s international wing). |

**Post election ’16 – the long term causes and meaning of Trump’s victory  
and organizing in this era**

Trump’s victory and its aftermath should push us toward a serious reflection of what democracy is and what kind of society it is we’d like to live in. Italy, Europe and indeed no part of the world is immune to the dynamics which led to this situation and neither will any part of the world be spared its consequences.

A striking feature of the advertising extravaganza cynically called an election is the profound misconception of democracy on display across the entire spectrum. The corporate media in the vanguard as the mouthpiece of private power is no surprise. A bit surprising on the other hand were many left publications and commentators(even many anti-Democrat/Clinton or pro-Green Party I have in mind here), good people and entities, many of which I agree on virtually everything, were simply unable to grasp that elections and casting a vote are not profound political acts, yet do, given the enormous imbalance of power both globally and domestically, have immense consequences. (I myself was guilty of this to a degree). No time to go into them all here, but consequences are seen everywhere from underprivileged minority and low-income domestic populations to poor, exploited third world populations.

One does not compromise his or her integrity by casting a ballot to fend off the worst candidate in the short run. That is not tantamount to giving validity to the current system. Chomsky, libertarian socialist and anarcho-syndicalist, has the greatest quote on this: “one should take 5 minutes to make a decision on this and then go right back to what you were doing”, meaning right back to carrying out the long, hard and real work required to change society for the better outside of the electoral spectrum. There is no contradiction in, for instance, actively working to get figures like Hillary Clinton put in the Hague for the rest of their days for war crimes in Libya while at the same time taking 5 minutes to pull a lever to prevent an openly proto-fascist orange orangutan from taking power of the most destructive military in world history and filling his administration with proto-fascists who will encourage the most vile strains in US history to come to the forefront. Most of all he’ll be filling his administration with climate deniers, like his choice to lead the EPA, at precisely what will likely turn out to be the most delicate moment in human history with the phenomenon which may doom us all – climate change.

Even the Green Party, whose platform is astounding in its unprecedented proximity to public opinion and its actual adherence to international law – a first for a major US political party – expresses a profound misunderstanding of politics and democracy, joining the ranks of the two major parties in that respect. The party’s positions are correct and full of integrity so it is shocking that they seem unable to wrap their heads around the fact that a political organization, especially one keen on transforming society as an electoral party, must be built from the ground up, and not simply show up for presidential electoral extravaganzas brought to you by the marketing industry every 4 years. Just as any changes in society are brought about by the ground up and not by leaders signing their names to legislation, so are movements made, solidarity born, parties born, consciousness changed.

So a message here to activists is that activism, the crucial work carried out by ordinary people to move toward a green economy to avert catastrophic climate change, stop wars and prevent illegal occupations carried out by the US government, push for universal healthcare and publicly funded higher educations, an end to privatization of public resources etc., does not have to necessarily compromise its integrity by having an electoral expression. Don’t like the parties? Let’s form a new one while supporting in the meantime the worst from occurring. Activism must damn sure be weary of power, as “most attracted to it are mediocre or venal.” But I fear we fall into a decades long perpetual slide into offering only resistance instead of actually proactively putting forward an agenda by building cross movement alliances with which we are all sympathetic. There is no more time as the climate crisis looms over and dwarfs all other issues, alongside that of nuclear arms.

If nothing is done in the coming period to radically alter the trajectory we’re on then we are, according to all scientific data, looking realistically and soberly at the final century of decent human survival on this planet. We must face up to this. (Nov 8th Morocco conference climate report, same day as election). The Republican party, whose president-elect and administration are full of climate deniers, is the reason last year’s Paris agreement proposals likely will not be implemented(already too weak), which may be and is often called a “death knell to the species.” Not opinions here, don’t take my word for it, the science is all there, many of us in our own lifetimes are going to suffer this, putting aside our children and grandchildren.

There’s one party left in the US – it’s moderate republicans, which is the Democratic Party. The Republican Party ceased to exist as a political party way before Trump. For some time now it’s been some other kind of organization in “abject servitude and in lockstep uniformity” to the corporate sector. They realized between Nixon and Reagan, but especially during the 1980s, that they had no policies which the public could possibly support. So they sought to mobilize sectors who were always there yet had never been unified into an electoral base – evangelicals(the US is one of the most fundamentalist societies in the world), nativists, white nationalists, gun owners, racists, frightened people who believe everything is being taken away from them. That’s been the base of the Republicans for 30 odd years. (Much of the left fell into identity politics and cultural wars during this period, forgetting about economic justice and class war being waged on most of the population.)

The more important story, over this same period of roughly 45 years, is that we are in the middle (or possibly getting toward the end) of the neoliberal period (though there’s nothing new or liberal about it) in which both major parties joyfully have taken part in carrying out an unprecedented assault on the working population through collusion with corporations, big banks and finance capital. Taxes on corporations and the rich have been severely cut, we’ve witnessed the shrinking of tax pools, manufacturing moved abroad, public services gutted, stagnation and decline of real wages and living standards. Unions have finally been destroyed, the largest source of working class conscience and solidarity in the 20th century. The postwar years from the late 40s through the mid-70s had seen the most egalitarian growth in US history – the now referred to “golden age” of US capitalism – occurring at a time when income taxes at top levels arrived at over 90% in the 1950s and 60s. President Eisenhower, a Republican, had proclaimed that anyone not accepting the New Deal of FDR as a political reality in the US shouldn’t be allowed to participate in the political process. It’s rather telling, that now in 2016 it takes a self-described “socialist”- who is a good man of integrity but nothing more than a New Deal democrat or mainstream European social democrat – to propose a “political revolution” of millions of people simply to restore New Deal programs from the 1930s. Both parties have been pushed to the right as wealth has been ever more obscenely concentrated. One of the most striking characteristics then of this neoliberal period is the persistently widening divide between public policy and public attitudes, to which I believe we should hold the spineless pseudo-electoral left of the Democratic Party culpable, as well as their cowardly center-left counterparts in Europe, the PD here, Labor in the UK, the Socialist Party in France etc.

These parties wholeheartedly abandoned the working classes in the US and largely across Europe after the post war Bretton Woods system on controlling international capital flows was lifted in the early 1970s through pressure by business sectors, their courtiers in governments and a fanatical religious belief in the fiction of free markets. (creating a “virtual parliament” of capital and investment over domestic political activity and the vampire squid of a financialized economy). Working classes across the west were subsequently told they had to compete against prison labor in Southeast Asia and workers making pennies a day in China. Manufacturing left the west for these low cost areas, increasing profits for shareholders and managers. Cities and states in the US lost tax revenue, public services and departments were cut, people, especially white males, eventually lost a sense of dignity they thought they deserved, crime and drug use rose and lives were destroyed.

Politicians in the major political parties had a cute game to play in order to avoid the suicide of raising taxes on their constituents and to keep the veneer of a capitalist system running, which was teetering on the edge of implosion. Instead of taxing corporations and the wealthy their fair share so as to continue funding public services and keep the country going, governments now began to borrow it from them at interest. I’ll repeat that. Governments, instead of taxing them as they previously had, gave corporations tax cuts, massive subsidies, incentives etc. and they in turn lent it back to the governments at interest. The result? Governments work up an unsustainable debt and continue pushing the problem into the future onto someone else. At the same time, beginning in the late 70s/early 80s, individuals began to mirror this dynamic by borrowing on credit as well in order to maintain the illusion of the American Dream. Even with two adults now working full time by that point they were still unable to live the lives they hoped and were forced to accept stagnating or declining real wages, the loss of benefits and security and the eventual theft of their pensions.

What the corporate sector then did with the money coming out of their ears had little to nothing to do with massive growth subsequently seen in the 80s and 90s and beyond. Over the last 4 decades, Americans have witnessed this growth and development go into very few pockets.

Concentrated wealth leads reflexively to concentrated political power. The 90% tax on corporations and the wealthy decreased by 60% and has been in the 30 percentile range since the 1980s. (Oxfam – 2015 study – 62 individuals own as much wealth as the lower half of the world’s population)

Mainstream political science, not Marxists, over the last two decades particularly have demonstrated, now conclusively with a Princeton study from 3 years ago, what had long been understood that as a result of the neoliberal assault, 70% of the US population is now effectively disenfranchised. Their attitudes and opinions simply have no effect on policy. The top 20% managerial class predictably holds great weight over Washington and state and local governments while the top fraction of 1% essentially set policy.

The two parties of business have colluded in this one sided class war waged by business and now financial capital, a war which long preceded the current neoliberal period but which is unusual in its intensity since the economy was financialized, producing recession after recession and crash after crash. The Democrats have rarely been the working person’s friend, in actual fact, and have only begrudgingly supported the working classes when severely pressured. Remember the New Deal measures of a minimum wage, social security, unemployment insurance, federal jobs programs etc. were bitterly fought for over long periods by socialist and communist parties and very large sympathetic labor unions in the 1930s. FDR made a deal with them to save capitalism. Also remember it was Bill Clinton who passed NAFTA in 1994, often called the greatest betrayal of the US working class since the Taft Hartley Act of 1947, as well as the evisceration of the Glass Steagall Act in 1999 which tore down the firewalls between investment and commercial banks and led directly to the global, Wall St. led crash of 2007-8.

So we have now an election of a multi-millionaire former first lady and a billionaire trust fund baby representing the interests of corporate and finance capital and we wonder why we had around 246 million eligible voters and only half of them bothered to actually vote. So much of the population feels left out, fearful, confused, resentful.

The atomization in the US, wrought on by a century of one-sided relentless class war, is staggering, leaving people feeling hopeless in front of their televisions or pcs. “What can I do?” Alone, not much. In groups, quite a lot.

The left and all of people of good faith must ask themselves, “why aren’t we organizing these people who’ve been left out?” Why are they left to unpalatable forces to be manipulated and conned on their fears and frustrations, divert their anger towards government and the vulnerable and vote against their own interests? Why haven’t they been consistently reminded that their antagonists are on Wall St. and in the corporate sector and that governments are simply their tools?

Solidarity must be class based and worldwide. It’s the vast majority of us.

The “extreme center”, as aptly referred to by Tariq Ali, is this neoliberal consensus supported by liberal and conservative governments across the west and their bankrollers in the private sector. We’ve lost sight of this over the preceding decades and so the left lost the glue which held it together and the public lost a voice.

Well before Marx and the initial socialist, communist and anarcho-syndicalist movements, American workers in the early 19th century at the dawn of the industrial revolution in eastern Massachusetts saw wage labor as a form of chattel slavery, (later a position of the Republican Party under Lincoln.) seeing their dignity taken away from them and declaring that “those who work in the mills should own and run them.” The original idea of socialism, taken for granted during the Enlightenment and which is simply an extension of democracy to industrialized societies, is that workers should be in control of their own work. (“Humboldt says if he does it under external coercion, like pay, for wages, we may admire what he does but we despise what he is. On the other hand, if he does it out of his own free, creative expression of himself, under free will, not under external coercion of wage labor, then we also admire what he is because he’s a human being.”)The hierarchy, compulsion and contradictions inherent in capitalist enterprises are the seeds with which all the problems we see unfolding now can be traced. Pulling a lever every few years for a leader of some sort won’t change society in the long run. Through popular organization, the power dynamic must be flipped and leaders must be dictated to by popular constituencies. Instead of a corporate puppet coming to a town with a PR apparatus where no one believes a word he says and then the local population goes home, democracy’s antithesis we see now, democracy would instead mean these people getting together and drawing up what they want accomplished and if someone outside of their own ranks wants to be their representative he or she can come to the town and he or she would be dictated to by the people, approved by the people and recalled by the people if necessary.

A few words from professor and economist Richard Wolff:

“The fate that befell Obama will haunt Trump. The Democrats will work for that. For the new left emerging from Occupy, the Sanders campaign, Black Lives and other groups, opportunity lies in pinpointing capitalism as the problem and in defining a direction for system change as the solution. Obama, Trump and Clinton cannot solve our social problems because they refuse to confront, criticize or see beyond the capitalism they thereby serve.

A new left politics will likely focus on how capitalist enterprises (factories, offices and stores) are organized. It will argue that in them a tiny number of people — major shareholders and boards of directors they select — wield undemocratic command, excluding the vast majority of workers. The few at the top make the basic decisions about what, how and where to produce and what to do with the profits. For a long time, their self-serving decisions yielded what’s best for them but also what’s been socially destructive for the rest of us, including this election.

The emerging new left politics will work for democratizing enterprises and thereby the economy. In place of hierarchical, top-down autocratic enterprise organization, it will advance worker cooperatives (WSDEs – worker self-directed enterprises), owned and operated by workers who make basic decisions democratically: one worker, one vote. The success of this movement would mean that political will and organization can finally address and transform the systemic roots of so many of this country’s problems. And those are the goals for a genuinely new politics.”

Lucas E. Alden

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