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by ROB URIE
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Donald Trump and the American Left



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The election of Donald Trump fractured the American Left. The abandonment of class analysis in response to Mr. Trump's racialized nationalism left identity politics to fill the void. This has facilitated the rise of neoliberal nationalism, an embrace of the national security state combined with neoliberal economic analysis put forward as a liberal / Left response to Mr. Trump's program. The result has been profoundly reactionary.

What had been unfocused consensus around issues of economic justice and ending militarism has been sharpened into a political program. A nascent, self-styled socialist

movement is pushing domestic issues like single payer health care, strengthening the social safety net and reversing wildly unbalanced income and wealth distribution, forward. Left unaddressed is how this program will move forward without a revolutionary movement to act against countervailing forces.

As widely loathed as the Democratic establishment is, it has been remarkably adept at engineering a reactionary response in favor of establishment forces. Its demonization of Russia! has been approximately as effective at fomenting reactionary nationalism as Mr. Trump's racialized version. Lest this be overlooked, the strategy common to both is the use of oppositional logic through demonization of carefully selected 'others.'

This points to the most potent fracture on the Left, the question of which is the more effective reactionary force, the Democrats' neoliberal nationalism or Mr. Trump's racialized version? As self-evident as the answer apparently is to the liberal / Left, it is only so through abandonment of class analysis. Race, gender and immigration status are either subsets of class or the concept loses meaning.

By way of the reform Democrat's [analysis](#), it was the shift of working class voters from Barack Obama in 2012 to Donald Trump in 2016 that swung the election in Mr. Trump's favor. To the extent that race was a factor, the finger points up the class structure, not down. This difference is crucial when it comes to the much-abused 'white working-class' explanation of Mr. Trump's victory.

What preceded Donald Trump was the Great Recession, the most severe capitalist crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Great Recession followed approximately three decades of neoliberal de-industrialization, of policies intended to reduce the power of organized labor, reduce working class wages and raise economic insecurity under the antique capitalist theory that destitution motivates workers to produce more for less in return.

The illusion / delusion that these problems— lost livelihoods, homes, social roles, relationships, sense of purpose and basic human dignity— were solved, or even addressed, by national Democrats, illustrates the class divide at work. The economy that was revived made the rich fabulously rich, the professional / managerial class comfortable and left the other 90% in various stages of economic decline.

Left apparently unrecognized in bourgeois attacks on working class voters is that the analytical frames at work— classist identity politics and liberal economics, are ruling class ideology in the crudest Marxian / Gramscian senses. The illusion / delusion that they are factually descriptive is a function of ideology, not lived outcomes.



Here's the rub: Mr. Trump's critique of neoliberalism can accommodate class analysis whereas the Democrats' neoliberal nationalism explicitly excludes any notion of economic power, and with it the possibility of class analysis. To date, Mr. Trump hasn't left this critique behind— neoliberal trade agreements are currently being renegotiated.

Asserting this isn't to embrace economic nationalism, support policies until they are clearly stated or trust Mr. Trump's motives. But the move ties analytically to his critique of neoliberal economic policies. As such, it is a potential monkey wrench thrown into the neoliberal world order. Watching the bourgeois Left put forward neoliberal trade theory to counter it would seem inexplicable without the benefit of class analysis.

Within the frame of identity politics rich and bourgeois blacks, women and immigrants have the same travails as their poor and working-class compatriots. Ben Carson (black), Melania Trump (female) and Melania Trump (immigrant) fit this taxonomy. For them racism, misogyny and xenophobia are forms of social violence. But they aren't fundamental determinants of how they live. The same can't be said for those brutalized by four decades of neoliberalism

The common bond here is a class war launched from above that has uprooted, displaced and immiserated a large and growing proportion of the peoples of the West. This experience cuts across race, gender and nationality making them a subset of class. If these problems are rectified at the level of class, they will be rectified within the categories of race, gender and nationality. Otherwise, they won't be rectified.

Democrats could have confronted the failures of neoliberalism without resorting to economic nationalism (as Mr. Trump did). And they could have confronted unhinged militarism without Mr. Trump's racialized nationalism. But this would have meant

confronting their own history. And it would have meant publicly declaring themselves against the interests of their donor base.

Mr. Trump's use of racialized nationalism is the primary basis of analyses arguing that he is fascist. Left unaddressed is the corporate-state form that is the basis of neoliberalism and was the basis of European fascism. Recent Left analysis proceeds from the premise that state control of the corporate-state form is fascism while capitalist control—neoliberalism, is something else.

Lest this not have occurred, FDR's New Deal was state control of the corporate-state form. The only widely known effort to affect a fascist coup in the U.S. was carried out by Wall Street titans in the 1930s to wrest control from FDR before the New Deal was fully implemented. Put differently, the people who caused the Great Depression wanted to control its aftermath. And they were fascists.

More recently, the effort to secure capitalist control has been led by liberal Democrats using Investor-State Dispute Resolution (ISDS) clauses in trade agreements. So that identity warriors might understand the implications, this control limits the ability of governments to rectify race and gender bias because supranational adjudication can overrule them.

So, is race and / or gender repression any less repressive because capitalists control the levers? Colonial slave-masters certainly thought so. The people who own sweatshops probably think so. Most slumlords probably think so. Employers who steal wages probably think so. The people who own for-profit prisons probably think so. But these aren't 'real' repression, are they? Where's the animosity?

As political scientist [Thomas Ferguson](#) has been arguing for decades and [Gilens and Page](#) have recently chimed in, neither elections nor the public interest hold sway in the corridors of American power. The levers of control are structural— congressional committee appointments go to the people with lots of money. Capitalist distribution controls the politics.

The liberal explanation for this is 'political culture.' The liberal solution is to change the political culture without changing the economic relations that drive the culture. This is also the frame of identity politics. The presence of a desperate and destitute underclass lowers working class wages (raising profits), but ending racism is a matter of changing minds?

This history holds an important lesson for today's nascent socialists. The domestic programs recently put forward, as reasonable and potentially useful as they are, resemble

FDR's effort to save capitalism, not end it. The time to implement these programs was when Wall Street was flat on its back, when it could have been more. This is the tragedy of Barack Obama.

Despite the capitalist rhetoric at the time, the New Deal wasn't 'socialism' because it never changed control over the means of production, over American political economy. Internal class differences were reduced through redistribution, but brutal and ruthless imperialism proceeded apace overseas.

The best-case scenario looking forward is that Donald Trump is successful with rapprochement toward North Korea and Russia and that he throws a monkey wrench into the architecture of neoliberalism so that a new path forward can be built when he's gone. If he pulls it off, this isn't reactionary nationalism and it isn't nothing.

Otherwise, the rich have assigned the opening classes the task of defending their realm. Step 1: divide the bourgeois into competing factions. Step 2: posit great differences between them that are tightly circumscribed to prevent history from inconveniently intruding. Step 3: turn these great differences into moral absolutes so that they can't be reconciled within the terms given. Step 4: pose a rigged electoral process as the only pathway to political resolution. Step 5: collect profits and repeat.