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Russian Oligarchs are a Problem, But Let's Not Forget American Ones



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Oligarchs the world over have long been destabilizing economies and shaping governing bodies for their own benefit. For instance, if we turn to the supposed ‘birth of democracy’ in Ancient Athens, elites (called ‘citizens’) of the *polis* ruled over the mass populace (the common people of the *hoi polloi*). Plato had instilled in many Greeks at the time (and this is an idea seen in practice from fascist lies of white supremacy to false justifications for

criminal wars) a faith in the supremacy of ruling class that the elites could justify *lying* to the *hoi polloi*, masking the truth the public was too ‘stupid’, too ‘ignorant’ to comprehend behind pathos and logos. The specific role of the noble lie, as presented by Plato’s Socrates is to have a good effect on the polity by clearly defining social classes and position within the social hierarchy for all. Never a supporter of democracy, in the *Politics* and in *De Anima*, Plato’s student Aristotle presents a model of an oligarchic meritocracy (or in his preferred term for the rule of the few, an aristocracy), a social organization that depends upon those with ‘lesser’ souls (or those less noble, less filled with virtue than with vice), and those of the working classes especially had to be less concerned with the metaphysical and more concerned with their material labor. Over centuries of European and Anglo-American ‘democracies’, such positions on the deliberate maintenance of popular ignorance (typically coupled with or contributing to widespread compliance or complicity) through administrative means and misinformation have been re-articulated from Machiavelli to Mandeville to McCarthy, Robespierre to Rumsfeld, Burke to Bannon, ‘Socrates’ to Stalin. From Nuremburg trials to Nixonian denials, elites have enjoyed the freedom to not be burdened by such nuisances as truth, fact, or indeed, democratic means. In this paradigm, dishonest demagoguery is celebrated as a *moral* achievement, provided these lies lead to noble ends. What these ‘noble ends’ are isn’t quite so clear, either rhetorically or in actualization.

One of these ignoble lies is that the elites in the U.S. are not the handful of billionaires and mega-millionaires who not only control our economic sphere, but also shape political action, parties, elections, and the very fabric of law to best suit their own relentless drive for an even bigger, even more disproportional share of the world’s wealth than they already control. No, according to the calculated precision of reactionary political and economic forces at the heart of American discourse, ‘elites’ usually refers not to these silent but deadly oligarchs, but instead to the experts whose data disproves the views and interests of the true ruling class. ‘Elitism’ in the U.S. is a criticism levied against the intellectual rather than investor class. It is understandable, on the one hand, for no one enjoys being talked down to.

This definition of ‘elites’ that seemingly disregards wealth inequality *in favor of the wealthy few* in order to discredit their opponents’ ideological or political goals, especially when these goals have communalistic or socialistic aims. As the old adage goes, the United States has socialism for the wealthy and their corporations, and capitalism for all the rest of us. When we ask for even the slightest social spending (minus the sacred cows

of Medicare of Social Security, which are next on the chopping block), we are told to not listen to ‘elites’, such as economists, analysts, and organizers who describe the instability of the capitalist crisis economy, but instead listen to the ‘populists’ such as Trump who could not be more elite nor further removed (beginning at birth) from 99% of the public. But the insidious elitism that runs through every governing body of this country is characterized by preferential treatment for the ultra wealthy coupled with hyper-vigilant mechanisms of control set against the working, working poor, unemployed, under-employed, impoverished, and criminalized classes. CEOs, investors, trust funders, and bankers are elites where it counts, and their actions clearly show an insatiable thirst for more: more money, more influence, more power. These are the elites who truly think they are better than you, as their compensation packages should attest.

Clearly, at least a handful of the global 1% are becoming ever more brazen in their endorsement of colonizing projects. How else can we explain the increasing concentration of wealth into increasingly fewer pockets, the now ever-present austerity movements, attacks on collective bargaining, and illegal wars, policies, and gerrymandering we have witnessed as of late? Intelligence communities, militaries, police forces, cartels, organized crime, and financial institutions work almost exclusively for the interests of these oligarchs, in ever more transparent ways, however they may wish to present these institutions as for the good of all.

American oligarchs of an earlier age understood public relations in a way that current oligarchs seem to have disregarded. Each of the so-called ‘Robber Barons’ were very public altruists, founding top notch universities (including one of my alma maters, the University of Chicago), foundations, and charitable organizations. This doesn’t mean that earlier oligarchs were *actually* more generous. Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, and Warren Buffett have all ‘given away’ more to charity than any of the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, Stanfords, Carnegies, and Mellons. Yet, as a class, the wealthy in the U.S. as a whole give less to charity than they did them (per capita), as well as significantly less than working families. Earlier generations understood that wealth only exists through extraction, and that to sustainably create wealth the modes of production had to be constantly reproduced (ideologically and materially). They may not have liked paying their taxes, but they understood that the majority of taxes went to benefit the very economic systems and processes that had so enriched them. These men were villains in their own right, hiring Pinkertons to beat, maim, or even kill union strikers, paying far below subsistence wages, and destroying lives, land, property, water sources, air, and anything else they could

pollute or loot. Yet, these previous generations of oligarchs also realized that investment in not just charity—but indeed in the state itself—was conducive to their economic interests. For instance, historically, the wealthy few bailed out the U.S. government if the need arose (e.g. see J.P. Morgan’s gold replenishment scheme), but now the wealthy few expect *to be* bailed out. Perhaps this is due to the prevalence of inherited wealth, as the children and grandchildren of the robber baron group live on trust funds and investments when their predecessors built the companies, developments, and institutions that actually created the disproportionate wealth these few are still living off of. Perhaps it is due to declining educational standards or political activism (the latter deliberately undermined, especially in terms of union organization). Perhaps it is because the oligarchs now anticipate a coming age when their plundering will not be so unfettered, and hence they are grabbing so much now because they project an end to their limitless greed. Or perhaps greed has some underexplored pathological component that threatens domestic, interpersonal, and foreign affairs.

Trump is not an exception or aberration, his administration *is* the rule, and the rule has always meant rule by the few for their own benefit. A closer look at current political and economic developments should satisfy even the most ardent skeptic of the oligarchic basis of the American—and indeed all neo-liberal and neo-fascist forms of government—regime.

Foreign oligarchs, such as Trump’s good friend Rupert Murdoch (owner of the majority of U.S. media outlets, most notably Trumpian favorite Fox News), military and oil trade partners like the Saudi royals, and other authoritarian regimes not only garner praise from Trump (cf. his citation and praise of not only the Saudis, but also the Kim regime in North Korea recently at the United Nations), but give the distinct and disheartening impression that despite all of his patriotic and anti-‘globalist’ rhetoric, the Trump administration (as with previous administrations) is certainly beholden to the small band of billionaire boys. The international cadre of the super wealthy use flags, religions, borders, and ideologies to demark and separate us, but while delivering so much nationalistic bluster, oligarchs actually align most of their economic interests with each other transnationally. This alignment of mega wealth often occurs in the figurative sense of wealth extraction exerted on the many by the few, but also in the more literal sense of the cross-pollination of the global billionaire and mega-million class members’ investments and portfolios. Such circumstances go a long way towards explaining the crass hypocrisy of deriding other nations’ human rights violations while committing ever-greater cruelties yourself, or in

building coalitions to overturn democratically elected officials who have opted out of client state status. The Trump doctrine puts its faith in the cover of smoke and mirrors, for with sleight of hand and hyperbolically divisive rhetoric, the bank accounts that matter continue to bloat.

These oligarchs, globally speaking, are slightly more diverse than American oligarchs (who are overwhelmingly elderly white males, and hence neither reflective nor representative of the population), but colonial legacies still resonate through the capitulation of wealth to former and current imperialist powers. Let us take a quick moment to acknowledge that we have been paying an inordinate amount of attention to Russian oligarchs with connections to Trump, perhaps justifiably, but that we should also not neglect to pay attention to the unsavory *Americanones* he has surrounded himself with. Oligarchs are a threat to democratic processes wherever they have power; yes including in Russia, but also including the United States. American oligarchy is nothing new, but has seen its electoral influence and power predictably balloon following the infamous *Citizens United v. FEC* SCOTUS decision of 2010. It is no coincidence that each subsequent election following this decision has seen a dramatic uptick in campaign funding and spending.

A quick search online will provide more in depth discussion of each of these figures, but the following should suffice to demonstrate the obvious reality that the White House especially, but also Congress, Courts, and Bureaucracy, are controlled not just by the few, but by a particularly Wall Street, hide-your-money-off-shore, Fortune 500, silver spoon crew. There are clearly more oligarchs who rule this and other countries, so the few described here are not meant to be an exhaustive list. Indeed, people like the Koch brothers, the Uihleins, Peter Thiel, Kelcy Warren, Bernie Marcus, Robert Murray, Robert Mercer, Robert W. Johnson, Stephen Feinburg, and Sheldon Adelson (all of whom have donated inordinate amounts of money to Trump) are intimately tied to U.S. governance through their campaign contributions, funding and sponsoring of the Tea Party, the Heritage Foundation, Cambridge Analytica, ‘Americans for Prosperity,’ other union-busting organizations, etc. yet are not explicitly connected in a way that a cabinet post would make visible. Of course, oligarchs are known to hedge their bets by contributing to multiple candidates, ‘right’ or ‘left,’ for the Democrats are also not immune to Wall Street sway, or the unequal and undue influence of their own oligarchs like George Soros, Jeff Bezos, and Michael Bloomberg.

In typical narcissistic fashion, Trump has appointed people who are either like himself, or that he strives to be like (i.e. if, for instance, they have investment profiles that he envies). The oligarchs on Pennsylvania Avenue (not to mention in other branches of U.S. government equally under the same thumbs) are more akin to the 300 wealthiest rulers of the financial industrial complex (and all that it connects to) than the 330 million other Americans. Who do you think they are working for? Even the most cursory glance at Trump tax cuts, deregulations, attacks on healthcare, welfare, and other social services, and trade war initiatives reveal that the current administration makes no qualms about rewarding the wealthiest among us, even to the clear detriment of everyone else. And they're just getting started...

These brief descriptions simply provide enough biographical information to make the singular point that any of the 'forgotten' (read, 'conservative') Americans who saw some sort of hope in Trump should recognize the reality that their savior never intended much at all for them. Ever the sales/con man, Trump knew what he was selling, how to sell it, and who would be buying. In classic Republican manner, they promised to help *you* economically, but ever more transparently only serve *their* interests. None of what is listed here is new information, yet each of these figures is usually discussed in mainstream media as isolated cases, problematic only in individual ways, rather than a pattern of oligarchical rule. Let's start with the president's son-in-law.

Kushner is not some 'guy-next-door' that Ivanka just happened upon. The Kushner group has well-established ties to global real estate, investment bank, and money laundering markets. The young Kushner took over from his father when the latter went to federal prison for a variety of financial crimes. In a very real sense, Jared is to his father what Trump was to his; the public face of a troubled economic house he is ill prepared and ill equipped to administer, ever seeking approval, and ever trying to prove themselves no matter the cost. Who else is representing the ruling elites at the highest level?

Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross made hundreds of millions of dollars through investments largely comprised of bankrupt businesses he purchased, gutted, re-structured, and then monetized. He earned the nickname/title 'King of Bankruptcies' for these activities. Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin made a fortune working as an executive at Goldman Sachs, even while tax-payers lost inordinate sums during times of recession and financial crisis (and while some of Mnuchin's affiliated companies and investments aggressively foreclosed on and evicted people from their homes). Trump's Director of the National Economic Council Gary Cohn likewise filled his bank accounts with hundreds of

millions of dollars at Goldman Sachs. Also at Goldman was Steve Bannon, who used some of the proceeds of his investment activity to fund and co-found Breitbart and other far right organizations.

Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and her family are not only long-time fundraisers for the Republican establishment, but are also personally invested in privatizing school systems for their own benefit. Having never been to a public school, it shouldn't come as a surprise that her preference is for the elitist private education that was her privilege, and has provided so much income for her and her family. Secretary of Transportation (and spouse of Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell) Elaine Chao not only worked for previous Republican administrations, but also sat on several corporate boards (e.g. Wells Fargo, News Corp) and was a regular contributor on Fox News. Linda McMahon co-founded the WWE with her husband Vince, and is a long time supporter of Trump to the tune of millions of dollars in campaign donations. She was rewarded with an administrative position overseeing the Small Business Association. Before he was (now resigned/fired) Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson took the Dick Cheney path from the corporate boardroom (in his case, Exxon-Mobil, whereas for Cheney this was Halliburton) to the executive, all while he never really losing sight of your 'former' company's interest. Obviously, we could continue this litany and fill out Trump's cast of (mostly old, white, male) characters, but even in these few examples, a key question for supposedly democratic societies arises; Are any of these appointees 'of the people' or *for* them in any way?

Trump clearly doesn't care, and has voiced multiple times that he prefers to have rich people working with and for him. His disdain for the poor and working classes is apparent in nearly all instances that are not rally pandering or empty promises. Trump loves to boast how 'really rich' he is, as if this gives him expertise, qualifications, or as if wealth is some sort of measurement of one's character. Such wealth has not afforded him empathy, grace, or intelligence, so it isn't surprising that his wealth is his go to 'good' quality, both for himself and his minions. This is rule by corporation, entities chartered by the state by otherwise seemingly beyond the scope of the state to regulate (at least in this administration). Corporations are not accountable to the population, and you didn't vote for any of these unelected oligarchs. Corporations are run as dictatorships (little wonder then that major corporations have a long history of collusion and even endorsement of fascism), and the Trump organization was no different. He has promised to run the United States in the same way. Trump is a problem, of course, but the rule of oligarchs runs far

deeper than his inner circle; it makes up the very fabric of the ruling order of U.S. society, ideology, governance, and information. His clear incompetence demonstrates well that the beast of American oligarchy continues to live lavishly within and without government, even without a rational head on its shoulders.

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