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Reptilian Politics and American Leadership: The Party Debates

By Norman Pollack
January 20, 2016

The Republicans had at each other, narrowing their candidate field essentially to two, as the remaining incipient fascists desperately tried to attract attention, Rubio notably, with Bush in strangely paralytic or laconic mode, and failed in the effort. This political closure is what happens when the ideological spectrum is so confined that little possibility emerges for distinguishing oneself from the rest, and only the strong of will, Trump and Cruz, survive. Yet I sense real differences between them, Cruz by far the more dangerous, less on policy than on personality, the latter of which could so surcharge policy as to reach Hitlerian proportions in execution. Cruz is a bundle of suppressed anger and resentment, while Trump, as though emerging from Mel Brooks's central casting, is a less resentful, more "here I am, this is what you see," version of a comedic Hermann Goring, hardly outside the confines of totalitarianism, but still human enough to let contrary experiences and thoughts filter in. America in the case of either one would still pursue repression at home and hegemonic militarized goals abroad—a probability with the chief Democratic candidates as well, Clinton's fascistic-inclined demons a perfect match to Cruz's, softened for public consumption by public-relations assistance, and Sanders truly problematic as faux socialism covers over a dreadful foreign policy, support of the gun culture, and, even on health care, backpedalling into the dim light of gradualism. He isn't Trump, but neither is he a clear alternative to him.

I say “reptilian,” because of, appearance wise, in Cruz, pythonic eyes, behind which, from what he actually stands for in policy, is a constricting reflex-motion to squeeze out of the body politic any traces of humanitarian regard for others, especially when formulated as a moral obligation of government to serve the people, and in foreign policy, a quintessential ruthlessness based on a take-no-hostages attitude. Nothing squeamish here, across-the-boards. Trump, perhaps to his credit, and to his shame among rank-and-file Republicans, lacks the evangelical-killer instinct in converting every issue into an ideological watershed. He gives no evidence of having despised life, including his own. For Clinton, “reptilian” remains apt (and like Trump, less so for Sanders) in light of her creeping, slithering approach to issues, particularly involving militarism and haute capitalism (Wall Street) and her instinctive love of camouflage (a strong desire for concealment and dislike of transparency, especially in government). She too, like Cruz, goes for the jugular when it comes to perceived enemies, and is equally a vast storehouse of resentments ready to explode when given the opportunity. Sanders, by comparison, is no angel, but his opportunism appears shorn of vindictiveness, thereby allowing him, psychologically, to reach out to people in a more genuine way—the old Democratic schtick of welfare/warfare, that of constructive social welfare programs at home, retention of Cold War policies overseas.

Jonathan Martin and Patrick Healy’s NYT article, “At Republican Debate, Taunts and Quips as Rivals Battle,” January 15, barely scratches the surface, but does refer in passing to Cruz’s attack on Trump for embodying “New York values,” Cruz stating, in part, “I think most people know exactly what New York values are: socially liberal, pro-gay marriage, pro-abortion, focused on money and the media.” The verbal pus oozes out. One in tune with underlying psychological dynamics, however, wants more, recognizing the hatred behind the politically opportunist examples he cites. And fortunately, the next day, still in Charleston, scene of the debate, we find him speaking to a Conservative Leadership Project (NYT, First Draft, January 16) in which he mock-apologizes for his dig at Trump in the debate (my initial take was “New York values” was code for anti-Semitism) by enumerating a whole list of grievances: “Now I’m curious. Do the people of South Carolina know what New York values are?” Cruz continues, after first going on Sean Hannity’s show and issuing a news release, in what is an unstoppable gush of bitterness and resentment, incapable of holding back:

“So today, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton and Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York City all demand I apologize. Who am I to say no? I apologize to the millions of New Yorkers who’ve been abandoned for years by liberal politicians. I apologize to all the hardworking men and women in New York who’d like to have jobs, but Gov. Cuomo has banned fracking. I apologize to all the New Yorkers who are pro-life and pro-marriage and pro-Second Amendment. I apologize to all the small businesses that are fleeing New York City because of the crushing taxes and regulations.”

The reporters: Cruz “also referenced Mr. de Blasio’s past clashes with his own Police Department and proponents of charter schools.” And Cruz ended up, he hoped “that was the apology they were looking for.” Sarcasm, of course, is a thin veneer for something deeper, and Cruz does not disappoint. Above, besides the debater’s trick of linking Trump up to Clinton and de Blasio, his contempt for the word “liberal” is itself a means to affirm environmental rape in close association with unrestricted guns [it turns out, Rubio, Cruz’s ideological near-twin, spent Christmas Eve in Miami conspicuously visiting a gun shop to purchase a pistol!] and an attack

on taxes and regulation—together as tight a package of guttural neo-fascism as one is likely to find in national political life. For a Princeton-Harvard Law graduate, this is a bit disappointing, and the Martin-Healy article did not even mention Cruz's attack, during the debate, on Lawrence Tribe, an essentially moderate, yes "liberal (in contradistinction to radical), constitutional law professor at Harvard. Cruz bottom-feeds on the primitively capitalistic and on eschatological and/or evangelical custodians of the religious system, to Trump's slightly less zealously-minded, though plebeian-oriented neo-fascist, supporters—between them, a confining range, where temperament may trump (wrong pun) ideological rigidity.

My New York Times Comment on the Martin-Healy article, same date, follows:

When one considers that one of the two major parties put itself on display, the result is indeed depressing, that of a nation on the moral-ideological skids. The in-fighting was revealing of a hard core of Extreme Reaction, a rightward surge not seen since the days of McCarthyism following World War II.

And the people don't fight back: e.g., Cruz's attack on Lawrence Tribe will not prompt the Harvard Law faculty, regardless of political persuasion, to protest strongly the red-baiting of one of its graduates. A small detail—NYT, too, subjected to distortion and ridicule [on Cruz's illegal and devious reporting of a large loan from Goldman Sachs for his 2012 Senate campaign], and in this piece, passing over it lightly.

In truth the Far Right mentalset witnessed last night has become intimidating, or rather, the general response reveals how far the nation has tilted. Dare I say it? We are closer to fascism than perhaps ever before—last night, hooliganism and smearing in full flavor. Each one, with Kasich an exception, trying to outdo the others in proving Rightist credentials, so that, in Trump's favor, at least, despite his reactionary views, he didn't appear with the kind of rehearsed spitefulness and viciousness of his colleagues. Instead, he was matter-of-fact, which leads one to think, he doesn't possess the vengefulness that makes Cruz and Rubio so dangerous, a more strident version of the young Nixon riding the wave of anticommunist hysteria. I fear for America from what I saw and heard.

As of this writing, the Democrats still have their upcoming debate, with Sanders by all reports spurting ahead of Clinton in Iowa and a presumed slugfest in the making. Yet, nothing has really changed, with respect to the fundamental question of the direction of US foreign policy, of determinative importance for the structuring and democratization of American society. Clinton has proven herself a trusted warhorse on national security, with intervention and regime change in her DNA, along with maintaining Obama's Cold War policies of confrontation with China and Russia. As Secretary of State she did not question or even seek to moderate the Pacific-first strategy and related Trans-Pacific Partnership, nor lessen the EU-NATO potential engagement of forces via deployment to the Russian border, all other constants of foreign policy also left largely unchanged with respect to Iran, North Korea, and of course the Middle East, with one-sided preferential treatment of Israel. Sanders here has nothing to offer except more of the same, thus vitiating whatever possibilities of differences he has with her on domestic policy.

Domestic policy is important, but what does it say of a nation that provides better health care at home while destroying the lives of innocent peoples abroad? What does it say, of more stringent corporate regulation at home while actively pursuing market and financial penetration abroad—another false dichotomization of reality in which the forces of wealth-concentration are assisted and continue? Sanders seems a Left-Donald Trump in that he refuses to cut away from American imperialism, and on gun control, Hillary is right (although she is no better) in calling attention to his record. So, we await the Democratic debate, but I suggest that we remain faced with a constipated dialogue between the two major parties; not only are Cruz and Clinton snakelike in their conduct, boa constrictors squashing the life and vitality out of democracy, thereby removing the air from public policy capable of addressing vast inequalities of wealth and power, the continued exacerbation of climate change, and escalating hegemonic claims to global supervision of the political-economic order. Of Trump and Sanders, we can expect if not a carbon copy of their opponents, then replication of the systemic universe which has established ideological boundaries to human creativity in nation-building, leaving us the same problems of international conflict and a social order dependent on expansion to avert stagnation. Trump would militarize capitalism; Sanders would soften the impact. In all four cases, Cruz, Clinton, Trump, Sanders, varying degrees of the law of the jungle would apply, each in readiness to strike at prey deemed harmful to America, Bernie's democratic socialism, to his credit, perhaps narrowing the target-list, but not changing the overall picture of America's combative mental set.