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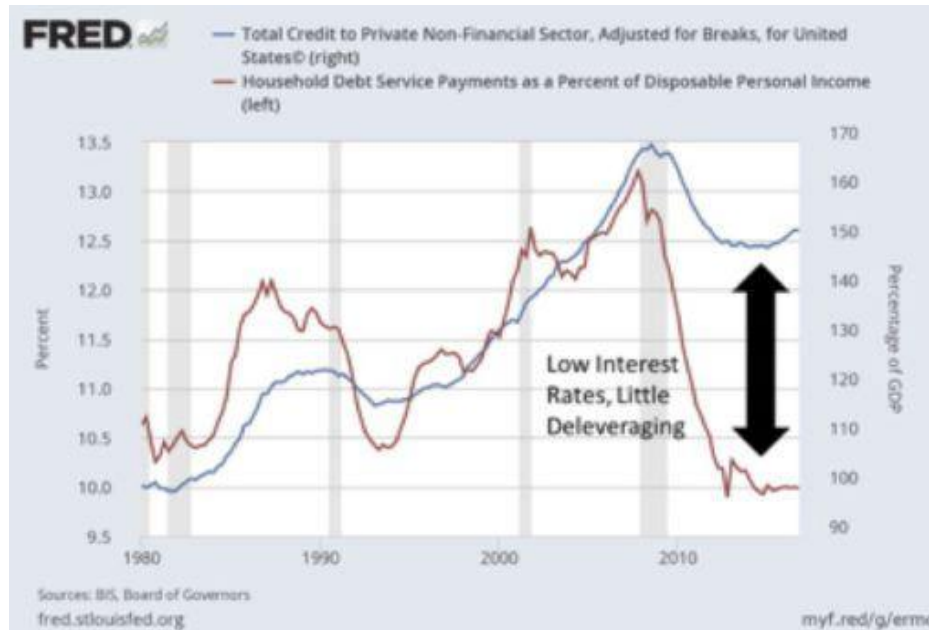
<https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/08/04/dawn-of-the-dead-why-american-politics-cant-be-reformed/print/>

## Dawn of the Dead: Why American Politics Can't be Reformed

By Rob Urie  
August 4, 2017

Soon after he entered office Donald Trump abandoned the populist rhetoric that got him elected and began pushing programs that benefit connected plutocrats. Soon after he entered office Barack Obama abandoned the populist rhetoric that got him elected and began pushing programs that benefit connected plutocrats. Soon after he entered office Bill Clinton abandoned the populist rhetoric that got him elected and began pushing programs that benefit connected plutocrats. Astute readers may detect a pattern here.

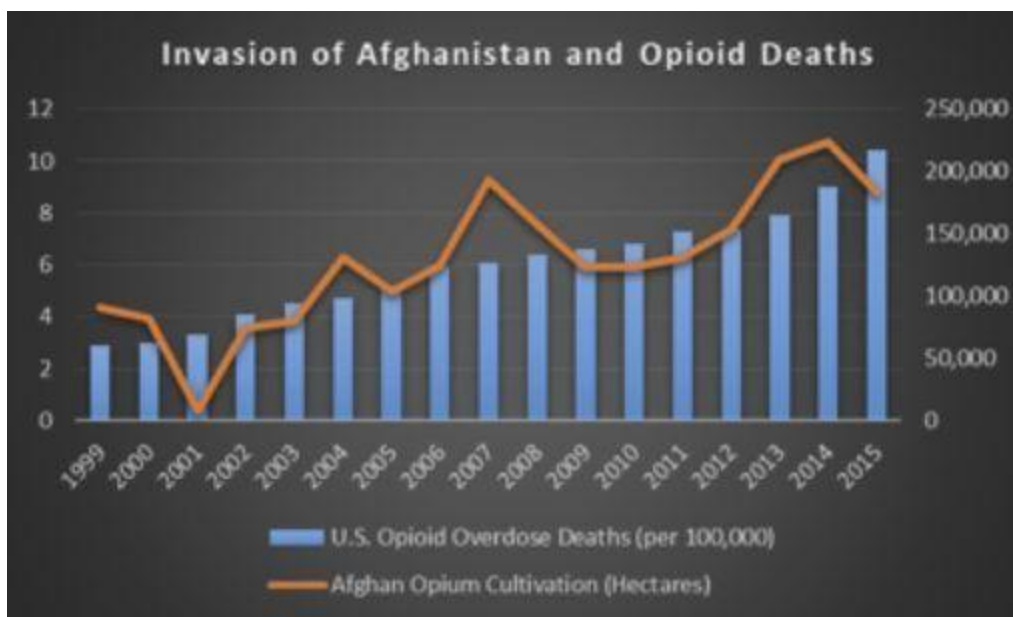
Populism in each of these cases was the purposeful mischaracterization of class struggle as resentment of the hands that nature and the faux opposition party have dealt working people. The unanimity of the 'solutions'— more deregulation, bailouts, tax cuts and special privileges for the already wealthy, points to interests at work outside of those publically spoken of. Were accidents and human folly sufficient explanations, this unitary direction would be wholly implausible. The half or more of eligible voters who regularly decline to do so suggests electoral populism without a populace.



*Graph: while some of the underlying characteristics were made less immediately onerous following the debacle of 2008, debt servitude is alive and well in the U.S. in 2017. Low interest rates, now in the process of being raised, temporarily made high household debt levels manageable. With debt inversely related to household wealth, the poor and near poor, now encompassing a plurality of the citizenry, are well aware of the economic fragility of their circumstances. The term ‘populism’ applied to this class is to render class struggle emotive, to be (implausibly) resolved through changing minds rather than material circumstances. Source: St. Louis Federal Reserve.*

The term ‘populism’ carries with it barely concealed contempt for those who defy the periodic fraud that is American electoral politics to act outside of sanctioned responses. The voluminous ‘the hicks got what they deserve’ articles that flowed from Manhattan based web addresses following Donald Trump’s election proceeded from a premise the election called into question—that the lived experiences of the technocrat and newly displaced working classes were similar enough to warrant similar political responses. That maybe, just maybe, these lived experiences weren’t that similar points to the self-referential myopia of the technocrat class.

Militant (except where it matters) disapprobation of Donald Trump illuminates reciprocal contempt between the technocratic and working classes. The difference, inasmuch as members of both classes work, lies in perceived / received alliance with the engineers and beneficiaries of systemic, systematic economic taking. Coerced adherence to neoliberal social mechanics, e.g. the weeks and months of each year spent navigating bureaucratic mazes to visit a doctor and / or to have a fraudulent charge removed from one’s bill, are the world in which technocrats thrive and the dividing line between partially and wholly untenable lives for the marginally attached plurality.



*Graph: for those old enough to have known the fathers, older brothers and friends who returned from Vietnam addicted to heroin, this story is familiar. Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 opium production, the base for heroin production, soared. In current circumstance pharmaceutical companies most likely joined with CIA connected heroin distributors to create the ‘opioid epidemic’ now sweeping the West. Profiting from layer upon layer of manufactured human misery has been the American way since the nation was conceived. Sources: KFF and UNODC.*

The Reaganite hoax that a rising tide lifts all boats (graph below) was replaced by the Democrats in the 1990s with the reduction that only the richest 15% or so even matter. 15% approximates the ‘professional’ technocrats who labor in political economy that concentrates wealth ‘upward’ (and who reliably vote). This arrangement allows Democrats, following from apologists for entrenched power going back centuries, to (tautologically) claim that nature, in this case ‘merit,’ explains income distribution. Ironically, Wall Street bailouts appear to have sealed this belief amongst those on their receiving end and amazingly enough, amongst those who doled them out.

Class tension over the intermediary role of this technocrat class as the rule-makers of systemic taking finds employed takers by-and-large despising those they are taking from and vice versa. This observation partially explains institutional racism in employment where Blacks are perpetually the last hired and first fired in the aggregate. Fees, fines, special charges and assessments are levied by private and nominally public institutions alike. Their regressive nature never occurs to those doing the levying because they rarely have to make the choice between eating, living indoors and maintaining the licenses and permissions required to remain marginally attached to ever less gainful employment.



*Graph: what might have changed to motivate the migration from Ronald Reagan's hoax that 'a rising tide lifts all boats' to the Democrat's focus on Wall Street and the technocrats who serve it and Silicon Valley? Money, the ether which holds the American system of legalized graft afloat, is the fungible form of concentrated wealth. 'Nature' was no more prevalent a factor in wealth distribution in 1963 than it is today, suggesting that specific political arrangements explain this concentration of wealth. In this context populism is an emotive, and therefore materially ineffective, way to assuage growing class antagonism. Source: Emmanuel Saez.*

Cynical posturing, the stock-in-trade of national Democrats, currently finds the Senator from Wall Street, Chuck Schumer, fresh from crafting Orwellian tactics to crush BDS, putting forward the Democrats' 'Better Deal' as if the poorer 85% of the populace doesn't know who is gauging them on their rent / mortgage, their car loan, their grocery bill and at the doctor's office. As the (very) top graph illustrates, the crazed crack-head holding a loaded gun to their heads (Wall Street) was given time and a few trillion dollars to right itself but the debts owed it never went away. Around 60% of the country is but one lost paycheck or a ¼ % rise in the Federal Funds rate away from complete economic ruin. In 2017.

The 15% (yes, the same 15%) of the country that finds the 'Russia stole the election' story relevant is undoubtedly the target audience for Mr. Schumer's 'Better Deal' talking points. Reminder: when Democrats last held the White House and both houses of Congress they passed a Republican health insurance sales scheme while bailing out Wall Street. To wit, Hillary Clinton earned \$21 million giving speeches to Wall Street *after* Wall Street killed the global economy. Unless national Democrats are suggesting that Russian operatives wrote Mrs. Clinton's speeches to Wall Street, the 'lesser' classes appear to understand this corruption and who does, and doesn't, benefit from it just fine.

The West is deep into a political crisis that has been fifty years in the making. To state the cliché du jour, Donald Trump is a symptom, not the cause. Before there was Donald Trump, Bill and

Hillary Clinton's 1994 Crime Bill differentiated institutional outcomes by race linking it in ignominy to Nazi law. This virulently anti-immigrant speech given by Bill Clinton in 1995 presaged Donald Trump's petulant xenophobia by more than two decades. Millions of Americans live in extreme poverty today because the Clintons 'ended welfare as we know it.' And by reviving Wall Street Barack Obama empowered the forces crushing the working classes of the West.

Charges to 'get the money out of politics' run up against the myriad institutional changes made to give the wealthy more control over political outcomes. The TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership), pushed by Barack Obama even after the Democrat's loss to Donald Trump, had covenants intended to increase the power of corporations to resist environmental, public health and labor regulations imposed under civil law. Bernie Sander's funding model for his faux-presidential run funded a campaign he left Democrats holding the power to crush— and crush it they did.

The dominant political parties in the U.S. have assumed absolute control over electoral processes at a time when the power of concentrated wealth has been solidified. The result is an all or nothing political process where who it is that perpetuates this system of upward distribution is the only open question. For those who forgot, Bill and Hillary Clinton attended Donald Trump's wedding and they consider each other 'friends.' The food-fight over 'Russian interference' is political theater for gullible loyalists, I mean an outrageous assault on our sacred democratic institutions.

A central challenge for reformers is that 'the world,' including the dispossessed plurality within the U.S., doesn't have another fifty years to work current political dysfunction out. A political system that can only support the upward distribution of social resources at ever-rising social costs will fail more people at an increasing rate. As fact and metaphor, Barack Obama's program to combat global warming was insufficient on its face and a cynical dodge when combined with his program (TPP) to give corporations the ability to override environmental regulations aimed at resolving it.

When global warming is tied to dead and dying oceans, misery-inducing and toxic industrial agriculture, poisoned air and seemingly unstoppable militarism through the profit motive a systemic driver comes into focus. Add in that only a small sliver of humanity takes the wealth produced by this system while all of the rest of us partake in its toxic excrescences and the outline of a class war becomes visible. The political choice is to leave this system in place or to not leave it in place. Everything else is to rearrange the proverbial deck chairs.

Finally, on the 'historical communism' front, I haven't seen one of these pieces since I was in high school. Here's a brief recap of the glories of capitalist imperialism. The link provides further links to smallpox blankets, the trail of tears, slavery, convict leasing, various coups and interventions to prevent democratic revolutions from succeeding and more details regarding three centuries of industrial-scale slaughter to promote 'de-centralized' economic interests. The internal / external distinction loses relevance when domestic economic interests drive militarized foreign policy.