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Politics, Democracy and Environmental Rebellion



Pulp Mill, Longview, Washington. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

A question worth asking is: what conceivable national electoral outcome would resolve the political dysfunction that currently prevents much-needed programs such as solving climate change and mass extinction, national health care, and an end to militarism from being enacted? While setting aside for a moment the national / international divide that facilitated post-War liberalism, class struggle has reemerged to redraw political alignments that lack formal institutions from ‘below’ to move them forward. Would a Democratic sweep in 2020 really change this political landscape?

Focus on elected officials rather than the systemic levers of class control support the carefully crafted posture of great difference between the governing Parties. Political marketing posits the locus of power within personal traits that suborn the class relations the candidates support to a passive role. In the realm of diversions, the passion of anti-Trumpism has been tempered somewhat since the 2018 mid-term elections by actual Democrats regaining control of the House. As enthusiastically despised as Mr. Trump is, all it takes is a gander at the ‘opposition’ to illuminate the political role that manufactured constraints play.

The near-term political success of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is likely attributable to the distance she has kept from the much-despised political establishment. She said so herself. To paraphrase, her constituents are the people who elected her, not her colleagues in congress. This return to politics, to taking one’s case to the people, 1) is the only way forward for left politics and 2) illustrates how institutional constraints are political in the sense that they preclude only those acts and policies that are inconvenient to official interests. Radical policies that benefit the rich are normalized as necessary— e.g. the U.S. war against Iraq and the Wall Street bailouts.

The democratic orientation of AOC reflects a fundamentally different conception of politics than the insider machinations of the political establishment. The attenuated consensus building of insider politics constitutes an alternate political economy. This is what makes representative democracy unrepresentative. What sustains congress is the power that is decimating the polity. When AOC declares her allegiance to this polity, it is external to the interests of congress which lie in fealty to the rich. The immovability of officialdom illuminates the façade of ‘external’ representation. The interests represented are those from the penthouse suite.

As sincerely held as American public opinions regarding ISIS, Venezuela, Russia, etc. may feel, they reflect an instrumental politics that feeds emotive ‘facts’ through psychologies to produce political outcomes. Political marketing, ‘campaigns,’ proceed from this process to posit the outcomes, rather than the process, as the locus of politics. Populism is to use this instrumental approach to win elections. Democracy is to forgo instrumentalism to act with others as political equals. This, rather than competitive instrumentalism, separates left from right politics. And this is why the young socialists in congress appear radical while promoting policies that have had majority support for years.

Another way to frame this is that ‘none of the above’ has been the electoral choice of a growing portion of the polity as the realm of official possibility, outside of vanity wars and transfers of wealth to the already rich, has narrowed. National Democrats running on

platforms of how little they can accomplish are ‘centrists’ in the sense that their appeal is directed at their institutional colleagues, not at eligible voters. In empirical terms, the U.S. has a nuclear arsenal that could kill the planet 30 – 50 times over, the ‘business’ of the ruling class is mass murder for profit and the U.S. is leading the planet off an environmental precipice. In the empirical realm, political possibility is quite broad.

Given the urgency of putting together large-scale programs to address climate change, mass extinction and an end to militarism, building political coalitions to move these programs forward is just as urgent. And given that these programs are contradictory to the interests of the people that determine public policy, these coalitions will necessarily be between people who stand outside of official interests. As political scientist Thomas Ferguson has convincingly demonstrated, official policy-making is [closed to non-paying customers](#). How, precisely, does electing representatives of one Party or the other change this?

Capitalists have long been skilled at portraying environmentalism as an elite interest. For most of the last four decades, the broader polity has sided with capital against solving environmental problems. The facile explanation is that voters have been duped through ignorance preyed upon using anti-environmental rhetoric. An alternate version of this idea is that cultural predispositions lead people to vote against their own interests, economic or otherwise. Left unconsidered is the serial propensity of liberal truths to persist until they blow up, at which point new truths emerge. Liberal faith in markets is one example.

As with most things, the issues are more complicated than simple divisions. Instrumental politics only explain later-stage views here. Historical development offers two epochs of current relevance— the Second Industrial Revolution that ushered in mass industrialization, and the post-War period that saw a great acceleration in the pace of environmentally unsustainable economic production. From around 1870 through the late 1960s, environmental destruction was viewed as a source of capital accumulation. The Western workforce was overwhelmingly employed in environmentally destructive industries.

From 1980 forward, the (Ronald) Reagan administration was very effective at portraying growing environmental awareness as a tradeoff between employment and environmental regulation. Economic downturns— the 1970s and early 1980s saw some very vicious recessions, were claimed to be the product of regulatory interference in free-markets. If people wanted jobs, say as loggers, coal miners or steel workers, then cutting environmental regulations was the way to employ people, went the argument. Left unconsidered was that transition programs from environmentally destructive to sustainable jobs didn’t exist.

This is to say that capitalists had a ready tool to prevent environmental regulations from being enacted. Just fire enough workers (de facto ‘capital strikes’) and environmental regulation was made politically untenable. The broader trend of relocating jobs and factories overseas to break organized labor and get around environmental regulations hadn’t yet come into focus. In this context, arguing for environmental regulation was to argue against the employment of a large working class that through geography, social connections and historical development, had few economic alternatives to employment in polluting industries. The key here was the lack of environmentally sound employment opportunities. Promoting environmental regulation without providing real employment alternatives played into the hands of capital by pitting environmentalists against the economic interests of industrial workers. These workers might perceive the long-term benefit of environmental regulation, but capitalist employment kept them living in the short term. More to the point, the power over employment that capitalists have contrasted current employment against a theoretical future cost. If forgoing logging a forest means that the mortgage doesn’t get paid and your kids don’t eat, anti-environmental sentiment isn’t hard to understand.

Following the Reagan years, the neoliberal turn that liberal Democrats took couldn’t have been more unwittingly destructive. Bill Clinton paid lip service to environmental issues while enhancing the power and mobility of capital and decimating the social safety net that might have softened the blow of environmental regulation on its economic casualties. Mr. Clinton’s Vice President, Al Gore, made combatting climate change a core issue without promoting a transition program that might have facilitated political support from its prospective economic casualties.

National Democrats thereby gained a reputation as elitist environmentalists who preached environmental regulation while slashing working class jobs. Mr. Clinton’s transition programs for displaced industrial workers consisted of technical education that was largely irrelevant to the low-wage, low-skill jobs that were available to them. The stock market boom that eventually resulted from Mr. Clinton’s financial deregulation hid the catastrophic results of his cuts to social safety-net programs until the bust led to a decade of de-industrialization during the Bush years.

While Republicans have long held to the ‘capital accumulation’ theory of environmental destruction as a thin veneer for making the rich richer, Democrats have been more skilled at creating the economic divisions that serve the interests of capital. Physical capital is what it is— the machines and relationships of economic production. Financialization, which in its current epoch began under Reagan, but came to full fruition under Clinton-Bush-Obama, is

what renders physical capital fungible. Through financialization, ownership interests were manufactured by Wall Street under the guise of ‘markets’ just like proverbial widgets.

Donald Trump’s populism as it regards environmental issues, his instrumental use of emotive ‘facts’ to produce political outcomes, harkens back to the capital accumulation theory of environmental destruction that puts money into the pockets of the already rich. Obama economic advisor Larry Summers had earlier [publicly endorsed this view](#) until he was forced to backtrack due to liberal outrage. The point: economists tied to the Democrats are in a bind explaining climate change and mass extinction as anything other than incidental consequences of economic policies quite like those proposed by Mr. Trump.

The Democrat’s deference to the universal benefits of giving Wall Street a few trillion dollars to continue shifting ownership of productive resources from the people who built them to the already rich likely rings hollow to the 90% of the population that has seen its economic lot serially diminished. Wall Street may have replaced a few percent of the well-paying manufacturing jobs that the bi-partisan neoliberal consensus decided weren’t worth keeping, but they are but a level of abstraction from them, not their ‘clean’ replacement. This paradox was embodied by the national Democrats’ support for the environmental regulation stripping TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) while posing as responsible stewards of the environment.

The political solution they chose, anti-populism, the instrumental use of emotive ‘facts’ to produce a political outcome, cleaved the professional class from the poorer 90% of the population through deference to historical social divisions. The emotive character of the appeal can be seen in conflation of beliefs with acts. What this class believes is its quantum of virtue, not its acts in the service of capital. However, in class terms the population distribution is 1% / 9% / 90%. The power of the professional class lies in its service to the rich, not in its size or its self-aggrandizing virtue.

The rise of Bernie Sanders in 2016 and AOC in 2018 suggests that this 90% is starved for democratic participation, not populist / anti-populist manipulation. Popular bloviation that either Mr. Sanders or AOC has ‘shifted the Democrats to the left’ conflates democracy with populism (as defined above). The Democrats are looking for a marketing angle, not changing their policies based on the popular will. Why this matters is that socialism is the fact of economic democracy, not the illusion of political democracy. Why would the 90% care what’s possible in Washington? If Washington can’t resolve climate change, mass extinction and militarism, then what need is there for Washington?

This isn’t to be flippant. Once it is granted that [government serves the rich](#), or less controversially, moneyed-interests, then it is clearly an impediment to resolving problems

caused by the system of wealth concentration that benefits the rich. What is politically feasible in this context is determined by who has the money. The posture of the political class is that it is needed to either better our lots or stop the other Party from making them worse. This is trickle-down politics at its worst. As stated above, the economic motives that drive congress are antithetical to the interests of the poorer 90% of the country.

Knowing American history is crucial here. Calls for a stripped down Green New Deal, one that forgoes a robust Job Guarantee, is a ploy to engineer a capital strike where millions of workers will be tossed out of their jobs to ‘prove’ that the economy requires environmental destruction and militarism. Furthermore, divide and conquer strategies that have half of this 90% calling the other half racist and / or deplorables is a gift to ruling class interests. A robust Job Guarantee would benefit people in inverse proportion to their economic marginalization— the most marginalized would benefit the most.

To the point made in the early days of Barack Obama’s first term, had Mr. Obama pulled an FDR and created something akin to a Job Guarantee, put culpable bankers in prison while turning Wall Street banks into utilities, saved the homes of defrauded homeowners and committed government resources to resolving climate change (instead of funding private efforts), the Democrats would have held congress and the White House for the next half century. What we got instead was a revival of neoliberal economic policies, and with them, Donald Trump.

The dominant political Parties are coalitions by and for the rich. Charges of Republican obstruction miss that Mr. Obama was able to funnel several trillion dollars of the people’s money to culpable bankers— one of the most radical acts in American history, with bi-partisan support. To be clear, the critique here is of the systemic drivers of these policies, not Mr. Obama’s personal qualities. However, climate change and mass extinction pose much greater risks to the polity while the response from the political class has been to move slowly. To act democratically is to create political coalitions that move the public interest forward. But this is not what these political Parties exist to do.

How many centuries would it take to populate congress with socialists at the rate of five per election cycle? And the question leaves aside the structural impediments that sooner or later make serving the interests of the rich the primary function of whomever is elected. Climate change is happening. Mass extinction is happening. And every minute that militarism persists marks more lives devastated by economically motivated violence. The time to act is now.

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