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Obama's Bourgeois Presidency

When Words Fail

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In the Age of Obama, inequality is on the rise and austerity politics rages on.

Obama could do more to improve the lot of those made worse off by these developments. But he really can't be blamed for them – much.

Enriching the “one percent” at everyone else's expense is what late (overripe, irrational) capitalism does. The main job of the state in capitalist societies — and therefore of those who lead states — is to make capitalism flourish.

Within the confines of “normal” politics in the early twenty-first century, it was therefore inevitable that Obama would preside over a regime in which inequality would become worse, and in which austerity would be the order of the day.

Increasing inequality is a worldwide phenomenon – afflicting all developed capitalist countries. The labor movement and the welfare state are under attack everywhere; and everywhere people are worse off as a result.

Palliative measures are still possible within the confines of the present system, and they can sometimes do a lot to make peoples' lives better. But, until the basic economic structure is transformed, the underlying causes of the problems affecting us will remain – and so will the problems themselves.

To dig up the hackneyed slogan of James Carville, the Clinton family functionary: “it’s the economy, stupid.” More precisely, it’s the entire regime contemporary capitalism sustains.

Therefore the only solution, as progressives used to say (but now seldom dare even to think), is revolution.

Or, since the solution need not – and probably can no longer – resemble the revolutions of old, we might better say that the solution is “regime change.” Too bad that neoconservatives and liberal imperialists have taken over and debased that otherwise useful expression.

This side of regime change, there is nothing to do but make the best of an increasingly bad situation. Obama has done precious little of that, perhaps because he has internalized the values of the beneficiaries of the status quo. But no one could have done a whole lot better; the constraints are too formidable.

In the United States, with mid-term elections just two months away and a presidential election coming in another two years, liberals and others who are tempted to cast their lot with “the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party” should bear this in mind.

We can certainly do worse than, say, Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders; just imagine Hillary Clinton back in the White House or some whacked-out Republican.

But no matter who is next elected President, the most those who care about equality and the wellbeing of the vast majority can hope for are a few woefully inadequate changes at the margins.

In becoming President, Obama stepped into a current that he could have done more to resist. But he could not have turned the current back. Only the great sleeping giant that “we, the people” have become can do that.

This is not to say, however, that our Commander-in-Chief gets a pass. There are far too many other things for which he deserves all the blame we can muster.

Acquiescing to the demands of unreconstructed Cold Warriors who want the United States and Europe to court catastrophe by encircling and humiliating Russia, is a prime example.

So too is letting clueless imperialists take charge of American meddling in the Middle East. His “humanitarian” interveners may seem kinder and gentler than Bush’s and Cheney’s neoconservatives, but they are just as dangerous. They have already done incalculable harm, and are presently about to do much more.

Obama also deserves blame for not moving forward more aggressively to halt global warming, and for not putting world energy policy on a less insane footing. Lately, even some billionaires have come around to the view that there is money to be made in “green” energy. They are way ahead of Obama; all he can do is muster a few weasel words.

Not only has he done almost nothing to limit carbon emissions; his “all of the above” support for the nuclear power industry has put the world at ever-greater risk of potential catastrophes.

Obama deserves blame too for a host of other noxiously wrong-headed policies – for trashing privacy rights and due process, for example.

High on the list too is his grudging, but nevertheless steadfast, support for the great American tradition of enabling Israel to do whatever it wants to ethnically cleanse Gaza and the Occupied Territories of Palestinians, descendants of peoples who have lived from time immemorial on lands diehard Zionists covet.

In capitalist societies, nearly everything governments do has economic consequences. But the constraints Obama, or any American President, has to contend with in these areas, and others like them, are primarily political.

The Obama way is to take the path of least resistance. When the constraints are mainly economic, he cannot be blamed too much for this – there is not much else he could do. But when they are mainly political, he has more freedom of action, at least in principle. Then the more reprehensible what he actually does becomes.

A leader with more vision and backbone than Obama – one genuinely moved by “the audacity of hope” — could surely have done better. Even after Obama, that prospect is not foreclosed.

But neither are the prospects encouraging.

Fans of Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders should realize that the views that they advance that make them look good, compared to Obama, pertain to issues about which Presidents can do very little. In areas where a President actually could do a lot of good, Warren and Sanders seem no better than the rest.

We no longer have a good way to account for, or even describe, the difference between those things for which Obama should not be severely blamed because no one, not even someone better at governance and more “progressive” than he, could have done much better, and those that a more able leader, operating within the confines of normal politics, could have much improved.

This was not always the case, but the words – and the thinking behind them — have fallen into disuse.

In the not too distant past, it would have been natural, for people on the left, to call Obama – along with other practitioners of what I have been calling normal politics – *bourgeois politicians*; and to call the politics they practice *bourgeois politics*.

This terminology nowadays seems irremediably quaint.

This is unfortunate, but it is also understandable; it is even justifiable.

For one thing, these words harken back to a time when it could be said, with some plausibility, that there really was a full-fledged bourgeoisie, and that it functioned as a ruling class.

To the extent this was ever the case, that time is long gone.

The word “bourgeois” has a complicated history. At first, it designated town and city-dwellers, particularly those involved in commerce. In early modern Europe, the bourgeoisie was a “middle class” – with aristocrats above them in wealth and influence, and with peasants, shopkeepers, tradesmen and others below.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, in socialist circles especially, the term came to denote owners of capital, “capitalists.” The Marxist tradition adopted this usage.

Even in the Marxist view, however, bourgeois politics was more of an ideal type than an empirical reality.

Part of the problem was that aristocratic power proved more resilient in the face of capitalist development than most Marxists and other socialists expected. It was not until well into the twentieth century that the old aristocracy’s hold over society definitively expired – thanks mainly to the declining economic importance of land ownership and the devastating effects of two World Wars.

By then, however, the bourgeoisie had largely disappeared as well.

Being bourgeois, in the fullest sense of the term, involved more than just occupying a defined niche in a capitalist economic structure. There was a cultural component to it too.

Bourgeois culture developed in opposition both to the aristocracy above and the popular masses below, but there was nothing intermediate about it. The bourgeoisie was the bearer of a new form of civilization.

Even so, it was seldom the case anywhere that a bourgeoisie, so conceived, genuinely ruled. At most, there were periods in the history of post-Revolutionary France, and in a few other Western European countries, where this was very nearly the case.

Nevertheless, the broad contours of the civilization the bourgeoisie created are still with us. The social class that gave rise to it is gone, but the civilization it produced survived its

demise. Indeed, bourgeois society – in many of its several aspects — has actually flourished in the decades since the last remnants of the classical bourgeoisie went missing.

In North America, there never was a real aristocracy (except perhaps in the pre-Civil War South), much less an aristocratic ruling class, and neither was there a genuine peasantry. Much the same was true in Australia and New Zealand.

Therefore, in these places, a full-fledged bourgeoisie never emerged either – despite the nearly universal prevalence of capitalist economic relations.

The United States has had capitalists galore since even before its inception, and they have run the country to their advantage from the beginning. But culturally they never quite comprised a genuine bourgeoisie; they never made the grade.

It is hardly the least of their shortcomings, but, compared to the genuine article, they never had enough couth. This is even truer of the fraction of the one percent who nowadays own almost all there is to own; and truer still of the politicians who serve them.

Nevertheless, an attenuated approximation of bourgeois civilization became established in the United States and throughout Britain's White Dominions – and, in due course, nearly everywhere else.

And now that American-style consumerism has become globally hegemonic, the process of worldwide *embourgeoisement* is nearly complete.

Thus, even in the absence of a real bourgeoisie, it still makes sense to speak of “bourgeois society” and “bourgeois culture” – and “bourgeois politics.”

Credit for keeping the notion alive must go to those who subscribed to the view of world history that Marxists and others took more or less as given.

For them, the French Revolution, though carried forward mainly by the popular classes, resulted in the demise (for a while) of the power of the old aristocracy and its assumption by a rising bourgeoisie.

In their view, in the next (all but inevitable) revolution, the working class, conceived as a proletariat – “in society but not of it,” and with “nothing to lose but its chains” – would do to society's new masters what they had done to the aristocrats of old.

This idea provided yet another reason to keep on talking about bourgeois politics, even in the absence of a genuinely bourgeois ruling class.

But as it became increasingly clear that the proletariat of Marxist theory had long ago gone missing, this rationale eventually lost its appeal.

Nevertheless, as long as Marxist politics survived in one or another form, “bourgeois politics” remained in the political lexicon. This was especially true in Maoist quarters, where the word “bourgeois” came to be used, with scant concern for its stricter meanings, as a general term of disapprobation.

Well into the twentieth century, this usage was common in the West as well, including the United States. Remember Lead Belly’s “Bourgeois Blues,” written in 1937. It indicts racial segregation in the nation’s capital. Washington, Lead Belly famously sang, is a “bourgeois town.” He got that right; more right than he probably realized. He hit all the bases.

Politically disparaging words are like that – often, they have strict meanings that can expand into new domains without much regard for what they meant historically.

Then, as circumstances change, they sometimes retract back into more historically correct usages.

“Fascist” is an example. It is like “bourgeois” in some respects, and different in others. The similarities and differences are instructive.

Strictly speaking, “fascism” refers to a political tendency that emerged in Europe, and areas influenced by developments in Europe, during the inter-war years of the twentieth century. Fascism arose in response to conditions peculiar to that historical period.

By the end of World War II, the fascist moments of the twenties, thirties, and forties had suffered an historic defeat. The remnants that survived – in southern Europe and, more ambiguously, in Latin America — were pale shadows of what once had been.

However, in countries where fascism had been defeated, and in the countries that fought against fascism in the Second World War, the word lived on – mainly as an epithet, an insult.

Typically, public officials and the police bore the brunt. Officials who were more than usually authoritarian, and police who were more than usually brutal called it upon themselves; often, they deserved the abuse.

But however reprehensible they were – and however much their behavior resembled behaviors characteristic of bona fide fascists — they were not themselves fascist in any significant respect. The usage had become so expansive that the term’s original meaning was effectively lost.

However, fascist or, better, neo-fascist groups never entirely died out – neither in regions where genuine fascism once flourished nor in liberal democracies, where fascist movements had never thrived.

And so, they have remained at the ready to spring back to life. The surge in anti-immigrant feeling in many European countries has had this effect. So has the rise of Islamophobia.

Even more saliently, Western machinations in Ukraine and other former Soviet Republics and in regions close to the former Soviet Union have made the idea descriptively useful again.

These developments make the less careful uses that were once so common more than usually misleading. Now that the term again has more legitimate referents, these uses, not surprisingly, have fallen off.

Careless uses of “bourgeois” have subsided too, though for different reasons.

“Fascist,” in something like its original meaning is back, because fascists are back. The bourgeoisie is gone, and will not return.

But this is not why the word has passed out of general currency.

That happened because political traditions, Marxist and otherwise, that found the term useful have themselves passed into desuetude.

But the term is useful still. In the Age of Obama, it is more useful than ever – because it calls attention to what normal politics does its best to obscure: the class character of the politics of our time.

When “bourgeois” was still in wide use, there was a class antagonist with which it contrasted. For Marxists, that was the proletariat.

However, even before Marxism fully took shape, it was plain that the proletariat as such no longer existed. What was left in its stead, the working class, was, however, a real world approximation. Its existence was indisputable and, for decades, its power was on the rise.

In most capitalist countries, working class parties formed and sometimes even ruled.

Nevertheless, with the arguable exception of the Socialist Party in the years preceding World War I, the United States never had a working class party of any significance.

For many reasons – some structural, some not — the American labor movement backed Democrats instead. They are still at it, despite a decades long legacy of betrayals.

Even in these coming elections, organized labor continues to offer the Democratic Party money and foot soldiers, demanding little or nothing in return. When it is over, workers will find that, as usual, they will have gotten back even less.

In recent decades, it has even become rare for a Democrat to utter the words “working class.” “Middle class” is the accepted euphemism.

How fitting that a bourgeois party would deny the very existence of the bourgeoisie’s historical antagonist! And how ironic inasmuch as the bourgeoisie was once, genuinely, a middle class!

In having a party system that effectively excluded direct working class representation, the United States truly was, for many decades, “exceptional.” It no longer is. In other developed countries, political parties with historical ties to the socialist movements of the past and to the labor movements of their respective countries survive. But, under the skin, they are all Democrats now.

Or what comes to the same thing, they are all bourgeois – in just the way that the Obama presidency is; not literally, but in effect.

Words fail; the language is inadequate. But there is no concise way to say it better; and therefore no better way to grasp the nature of the constraints politicians today confront. There is certainly no more illuminating way to mark the difference between those things Obama does for which he deserves a lot of blame, and those for which he deserves not so much.

Inevitably, Obama’s has been a bourgeois presidency. As such, it could have been worse and it could have been better. Indeed, it could have been much better, at least in principle, in areas that don’t directly impinge upon the functioning of the economic system as a whole.

But it could not have been fundamentally better, and neither can the presidencies of Obama’s successors, until the class character of American – and world – politics is radically transformed.

This is not a task that even the best (least bad) Democratic Party politicians currently vying for office are equipped to perform. Like their counterparts in other countries, they cannot do much good – especially not with respect to inequality and austerity — because what needs to be done exceeds the practical and theoretical limitations of normal politics in our time.

They could do better in foreign and military affairs, and in countless other ways where the constraints are mainly political. Perhaps they could even do more to keep impending ecological catastrophes at bay.

How much better off we then would be! But one has to wonder whether even this is too much to expect from bourgeois politicians in bourgeois societies, superintending capitalist economies in which ever fewer numbers of people own ever more of all that there is.

Perhaps all we can reasonably expect, in these circumstances, is to be led by Obama-like dunces, pursuing Obama-like policies that edge us closer to disaster.

The only solution... well, we’ve known about that forever. But how do we get from here to there? That, not who wins this or that paltry electoral contest, is the basic question of our time.