Fidel and Socialism
by Al Campbell

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There has been more than a “flurry,” there has been a regular snowstorm of articles written about Fidel since his death was announced on November 25. The majority of sources that send information to me, not surprisingly, had many good things to say about his record in history. The large majority of articles written by the world mainstream press, also not surprisingly, to the contrary had many less complimentary things to say, notwithstanding that many of the less conservative ones worked a few complimentary things here and there into their overall negative evaluations. The number of complimentary things mentioned decreased monotonically as one moved from liberal to conservative to reactionary mainstream media sources.

For anyone reading this blog who is less than 58, Fidel was our neighbor Cuba’s leader since you were born, until 2006. (I am assuming we do not have many readers less than 11, and so this comment does not include them.) Despite this extended span of time, the availability of balanced (or even dependably truthful) accounts of his life are minimal in the U.S. While this entry will make no attempt to summarize his life, I will suggest for anyone interested in knowing more about Fidel, who can find 1 ½ hours free time in their life, that they watch Estela Bravo’s 2001 documentary, “Fidel: the untold story.” As she has produced 30 award winning documentary films over the last 4 or 5 decades, which have shown on places like PBS, BBC, CBC (Canada), and similar outlets in numerous other countries, and been reviewed in places like the New York Times, the Economist, the Guardian, the Miami Herald, Le Monde Diplomatique, etc., most people reading this blog probably know of Estela Bravo’s work. While I do not consider her work either radical or pro-socialist, it is clearly solidly progressive (that’s a good thing!), and the description of her as having a “life-long commitment to preserving collective memory while pursuing a more humane future” seems fully appropriate. The film is posted on the United State Hypocrisy web site, ushypocrisy.com/2016/11/28/fidel-the-untold-story-full-documentary/.

Here I want to write my opinion on a few things concerning just one, though a historically important one, aspect of Fidel’s life: Fidel’s contribution to the historical process of moving beyond capitalism. Again, these will be just a few comments (as in, “a blog post”), far from an in-depth analysis even of this one aspect of Fidel’s life. Note that this is a question only discussed and argued about on the Left. It is also an issue of great concern to the Right, but they do not discuss nor have disagreements about it. They have a consensus that he continually contributed to (attempting to) move beyond capitalism, and that is why they all agree that there was a continuous need over the entire period to eliminate him (through assassination, regime change...
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About URPE

Founded in 1968, The Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) is an interdisciplinary membership organization of academics and of activists. Our mission is to promote the study, development and application of radical political economic analysis to social problems. This involves a continuing critique of the capitalist system and of all forms of exploitation and oppression. URPE’s mission also includes, coming out of this critique, helping to construct a progressive social policy, and a human-centered radical alternative to capitalism.

The URPE Newsletter

The URPE newsletter is published quarterly by the Union for Radical Political Economics. The newsletter is a place for URPE members to publish shorter articles, opinion pieces, abstracts and reviews as well as make announcements that may be of interest to URPE members. All submissions can be sent to the newsletter editor, Frances Boyes, via email at urpe@urpe.org.

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through invasion, regime change through economic destabilization, fomenting divisions in the leadership that could promote a coup (as in Algeria, Grenada, Burkina Faso, etc.).

I will consider here three of Fidel’s positions on building a human centered post capitalist society – internationalism/anti-imperialism, anti-bureaucratism, and the necessary central role of the masses in creating the new society. I will refer to places where one can find a number of his speeches on these topics over the years, but of course I am aware that “sayin’ it in a speech don’t make it so.” While again I can’t here present the necessary social history of Cuba on these issues, I will give some indication of institutions, projects and campaigns he promoted and spearheaded, directed at involving and educating the entire Cuba population with radical progressive ideas on these issues.

Internationalism/anti-imperialism is the easiest one of the three issues to address, in that essentially no one argues that both Fidel in his speeches and Cuba in its actions were not consistently internationalist and anti-imperialist. On the one hand, Fidel argued that trying to build socialism meant that one had an obligation to help those even poorer than one’s own underdeveloped country. Failing to do this would both reflect and promote the personal selfishness that is the death of any human centered development project. On the other hand, any victory anywhere in the world against imperialism weakened it. Fidel and Cuba were aware that imperialism would never accept their choice to build socialism. Hence they would be hindered in their project to do so as long as imperialism lasted, and the stronger imperialism was, the more it would attack them. Anyone who traveled to Cuba, especially before 1990, was struck by the extent that these ideas permeated the large part of the population that was concerned with such social issues. Every collection of speeches by Fidel has a significant number that comment on these issues, and Cuba’s material aid to poorer countries, and its material and especially political support for those fighting imperialism, are well known. For a short colorful presentation of this aspect of Fidel following his death by journalist, commentator and professor Vijay Prashad, see Fidel Castro – The Voice of the Third World, posted at http://portside.org/2016-11-29/fidel-castro-voice-third-world.

Socialism’s central goal of promoting “man’s ontological and historical vocation to become more human” (Freire – also less poetically and less precisely referred to as “human development”) includes self-governance. When a bureaucracy has usurped that power from the masses in a revolution to transcend capitalism, as in the USSR by the early 1930s, all possibilities of constructing socialism are precluded. Fidel spearheaded two major social campaigns against the bureaucratization of the Cuban revolution. The first went from the mid to late 1960s (and must not be confused with the economic and political Revolutionary Offensive launched in the spring of 1968, which is widely considered by those engaged in building socialism in Cuba today to have been seriously problematic for the Revolution). Fidel emphasized the danger of bureaucratism and the need to fight against it in a series of speeches over that period. See the 1983 collection Our Power is that of the Working People, Building Socialism in Cuba, pages 68-90, for a reprint of two editorials from Granma in March 1967, which indicate the nature of the arguments in his speeches at some length. That campaign is perhaps best remembered today for the extraordinary 1966 film, “Death of a Bureaucrat” by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, still available around the world. Fidel’s second campaign against bureaucratization, the relatively well known “Rectification Process” in the second half of the 1980s, was launched by him in the Third Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba in 1986, and had many dimensions to it. At the center was a rejection of appealing to individual material interests and consumerism to try to build socialism, and a return to focusing on developing a social consciousness (including the material base and institutions for it) of why socialism was a “more human system” than capitalism. But one dimension of the rectification process was (and this is obviously related to the central point of building a social consciousness in favor of socialism) anti-bureaucratism. The renowned Cuban intellectual Fernando Martínez Heredia wrote in 1988 as the second of ten points which he listed in an “incomplete list of the of the errors and negative tendencies” to be rectified: “the expansion of the bureaucracy (it grew 2.5 times between 1973 and 1984)”. (Desafíos del Socialismo Cubano, p 23). Thousands of people who had worked in the central government (unnecessary bureaucrats) were moved out into productive activity over the course of Rectification Process.

The 1983 book referred to in the last paragraph is an interesting collection of speeches by Fidel (and
some other central leaders of the Revolution) that address the topic of the necessary central role of the masses in creating the new society. In addition to anti-bureaucratism discussed in the last paragraph, other issues addressed there that are part of this topic include participation and socialist democracy/self-governance. The issue of ongoing popular participation in the Cuban Revolution has always been put forward by its supporters, both in and outside Cuba, as one of its strengths, and often as a fundamentally different aspect of the Cuban Revolution from the process in the USSR after the 1920s. One important aspect of this (not the only one, another being the participation of workers in their workplaces) is the existence and roles of the mass organizations. The 1976 Constitution recognizes the following as being responsible for representing the “specific interests of [the various sectors of the population]”: the Central Organization of Cuban Trade Unions (CTC), the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), the National Association of Farmers, the Federation of University Students, the Federation of Students of Intermediate Education, the Union of Pioneers of Cuba, and “others.” Of course, critics of Cuba’s attempt to build socialism argue these were always meaningless window dressing, created by the government without any real influence or power. The well-known and very moderate Cuba studies scholar William LeoGrande wrote in 1989 that “mass organization membership is so extensive that virtually everyone belongs to at least one mass organization, and a majority of Cubans belong to at least two.” Responding to the concern that such large memberships could be deceptive in regards to influence, LeoGrande found that “the mass organizations are still the main vehicle for political participation” and that beginning in the 1970s they had “significant input to the policy-making process.” While participation is an essential goal of socialism and its construction, however, it is not the same as collective self-governance. To be sure, there is an important relation between the two. Mass participation implies “voice” (the participants are listened to), since otherwise one would soon not have the assumed mass participation. This then implies “influence” and hence “partial self-governance.” But “being listened to” and having influence remains distinct from full collective self-governance in all social institutions, which has arguably always been the highest human develop-
even more importantly, actively promoted, many practices that will be essential for a post capitalist society to be conducive to supporting the ongoing human effort to “become more human.” Among many others, the three considered in this note; internationalism/anti-imperialism, anti-bureaucratism, and the necessary central role of the masses in creating the new society, were, and remain, centrally important. It is certainly true that despite its repeated pruning, bureaucratism always remained a serious problem for the advance of the Cuban Revolution, and that the amount of popular participation though impressive, and especially the amount of self-governance in all institutions of society, was inadequate for socialism. More critically, I consider that a balanced evaluation from the perspective of looking back historically at what this Revolution did well and what it did not do well enough, yields both that Cuba and Fidel made historically important contributions to the theory and especially the practice of these issues, and at the same time, that they did significantly less than was actually historically possible for them to do. (It is of course always easier to look back historically than to make a revolution in real time in a small country in a world hostile to revolutions, but it is nevertheless absolutely essential.) They made errors, but beyond that, notwithstanding their fundamentally correct basic position on these crucial issues, their overall practice frequently fell significantly short of their principles, beyond what could be explained by any claim of “historical and socio-political limitations.” Important positive lessons for future revolutions should be drawn from the numerous efforts, the numerous experiments, Cuba undertook to address these issues. And similarly, important lessons must be drawn from a careful evaluation of the inadequacies of what they did, a consideration of what else would have been possible in regards to these issues that was not done, so that future revolutions do not reproduce the same shortcomings. Taking all these considerations into account, I consider that it would be contrary to the historical record, to the point of being simply absurd, if anyone were to argue that Fidel was not one of the major contributors in the 20th century to humanity’s ongoing effort to move beyond capitalism, to build a better, more humane, socialist alternative.

Remembering Rina Garst

The URPE community lost a dear friend in 2016. Our thoughts are with her family and friends.

Rina Garst (Rina’s full name is Voltairine de Clayre, an American anarchist and feminist in the Freethought Movement, for whom Rina was named) was born on January 20, 1931 in Stelton, New Jersey to Anna Sosnovsky and Abe Winokour. She passed away on September 26, 2016 in New York City. Rina married Jim Garst in 1953. Rina and Jim were known in their community as labor, civil rights, and anti-war activists. They were very involved with the progressive community and housing groups. Rina was integral in putting together the housing program, NORC (Naturally Occurring Retirement Community). Rina is predeceased by her parents, Anna and Abe Winokour, her sister, Tisa Levine, her husband, Jim Garst, her nephew, Don Levine, along with aunts and cousins. She is survived by her nephew Andy Levine (Susan), her nieces Nicki Noble (Dan) and Emily Baird-Levine (Bob), along with many cousins and grand nieces and nephews.

Donations in Rina’s memory can be made to: Goodard Riverside NORC, 689 Columbus Ave., New York, NY 10025. 212-665-3853. - See more at: http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/nytimes/obituary.aspx?page=lifestyle&pid=181683539#sthash.7gOX7t0O.dpuf
The long-standing relationship between capitalism and democratic government in the industrialized world has, of necessity, always been fraught with contention. The mandate of democratic government to opt for the public interest most often conflicts with capitalism's singular purpose of maximizing profit. This struggle for the power to control society is ongoing, with one sector intermittently gaining ascendency over the other. Underlying the contention is the aberration of separated political and economic systems, with the people controlling the government through democratic process while having no say in the non-democratic economic system – capitalism. Historically, these systems were integrated – until they were separated by the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century and the simultaneous ascendency of capitalism through the Industrial Revolution. Since that time, the ongoing power struggle between the public and private sectors denotes an attempt to eliminate the anomaly of separated systems by reintegrating them. In times of economic crisis such as we’re currently experiencing, this battle intensifies as a failing capitalism is pressed to legitimize itself and secure its power.

Capitalism’s most potent tool for gaining power in a democratic society is to control – or absorb – the democratic government itself. In the U.S., this effort is abetted by laws permitting capitalists to give corporate-friendly politicians the vast sums of money they need to win elections. The strategy has been largely successful in congress and the state capitols, where capitalists’ representatives pass laws favorable to capital, repress legislation that isn’t, and fight to eliminate government aid and protection for the people – an overall effort to render democratic government impotent in its intended role as guardian of society.

Capital’s intent is obvious: free itself from any restrictions that limit profit – like those imposed by government oversight agencies such as the EPA, SOSHA, and the FDA – and privatize for profit all essential government services – energy, education, prisons, healthcare, etc., while eliminating corporate taxation. As the power shifts to capital during our worldwide recession, governments have been impoverished and public benefits curtailed through enforced “austerity” programs. The upshot is a society caught between joblessness and under-employment on one hand – causing waning consumption that further depresses the system – and diminishing government support on the other.

For those squeezed in this vise, political ferment is inevitable and its expression predictable. While progressives try to organize themselves against capital’s onslaught, reactionaries turn to their traditional appeals to rabid nationalism and racism as expressed in virulent anti-immigration attitudes – neither of which addresses the core issues of capitalism’s failure, but wins the favor of a public looking for easy answers. In the U.S. we have the corporate-funded “populist” Tea Party, whose vacuous policy consists mainly of flag-waving and misrepresenting the intentions of both the Constitution and the founding fathers. Yet, it has convinced enough people to vote against their own interests and democratically place in power profoundly anti-people federal and state governments. The presidential candidacy of neo-fascist Donald Trump is ample evidence of this distorted consciousness. Throughout Europe, extreme right-wing parties have registered startlingly strong showings at the polls. The neo-nazi Golden Dawn in Greece, the National Front in France, the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP) in England, and others throughout Europe have in common an ultranationalist policy of withdrawal from the European Union (EU) and anti-immigration racism. In England, “Brexit” has already won the day.

**Historical Conditions for Fascism**

Where is all this heading? Since it’s impossible to accurately predict the future, we turn to the past for hints. And indeed, we experience a frightening déjà vu. Europe of the 1920s and 30s exhibited many socio-economic characteristics similar to those of today. In
a world steeped in economic depression, strong right-wing parties emerged and in Italy and Germany actually captured the government. In 1936 in Spain, a coup led by Gen. Francisco Franco, who was aided by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, overthrew a democratically elected left-leaning government and established a totalitarian state that lasted almost thirty-five years.

The suppression of the political left and the backing of the capitalist class were common to these right-wing successes. In Italy and Germany, the Mussolini and Hitler movements respectively enjoyed much popular support – and for plausible reasons. These countries were not integrated as nation-states until the latter part of the nineteenth century (Italy in 1861 and Germany in 1871), long after both England and France had been unified – which is a prerequisite for the development of capitalism and its expansion into the vast empires required for its survival.

With English and French empires well established, Italy and Germany, as latecomers, found little left of value for their own capitalist expansion. This led to severe economic hardship in these countries, which was exacerbated by other events. Territory promised Italy as reward for its alliance with England and France in WW I was never granted. Italy was in economic and political turmoil, with its treasury emptied by the cost of war, no jobs for returning veterans, food riots, strong Socialist and Communist parties supported by the working class that threatened revolution against the capitalist and middle classes, and a factionalized parliamentary government unable to resolve these issues. This opened the door for Benito Mussolini, who founded the Fascist movement in 1919 with the promise to rescue the veterans and Italy itself, and who dangled before a distressed population images of the "glorious" Roman Empire – the ultimate ascendancy of the Italian people, which he promised to restore.

Post-WW I conditions in a defeated Germany were no better. In addition to a depleted treasury and a weak government seriously threatened by a persistent left, Germany was required to pay heavy war reparations – all of which, as with Mussolini, set the scene for Hitler’s ascent. Simultaneously, England and France gobbled up the Middle East – which was rich in the oil needed to propel industry and lacking in both Italy and Germany – and divided it among themselves.

The new European totalitarianisms had several things in common. Without an extended history of democratic governance, the way was already paved for demagoguery and the acceptance of dictatorship. But winning popular support also required the incorporation of socialist elements – one of which was public works. Hitler built the autobahns and commissioned Ferdinand Porsche to develop a "people’s car" – the Volkswagen. Mussolini dramatically increased the wheat output and, among other projects, reclaimed huge tracts of land for housing and agriculture – including the Pontine marshes near Rome, a feat that had been attempted since the days of the ancient empire but never before accomplished. These measures relieved the severe unemployment problem to some extent – the Pontine project alone occupying thousands of workers for about fifteen years. The projects were capitalized through another totalitarian measure: state control of industry in a reintegration of political and economic systems. This was the price the capitalists paid for being rescued from the socialist threat.

Most importantly, these nations had to dedicate themselves to strengthening and expanding their own nation’s capital exclusively if they were to permanently solve their extreme economic problems. This expansion could only come at the expense of another nation’s capital, since capital at the time was primarily nation-rooted and its potential for expansion limited. This placed capitalist nations in a deadly competition with one another that included the imposition of strong protectionist policies – an explosive situation that demanded extreme militarization on the part of the underdogs, Italy and Germany. Where would empire and its market come from except by taking it forcibly from those who had it? And so we see the root cause of both World Wars I and II.

What light does this history shed on today’s circumstances? The similarities are obvious: a seemingly intractable economic malaise; high unemployment; depleted government funds; restive, underpaid masses; and the emergence of reactionary forces. Can we therefore simply overlay the experience of history on today’s problems in order to confidently predict their outcome? Or, despite similarities with the past, are there differences significant enough to dictate resolutions radically different from those of yesterday? And if so, what are they?
New Times, New Political Solution

The definitive difference today is capitalism’s new paradigm: globalization. While capitalism was always “global” to some extent in that it was compelled to reach beyond the borders of the nation-state, it was still historically nation-state rooted. Capital’s subsequent intensified consolidation through mergers and its ability to cross borders has resulted in huge transnational corporations (TNCs) – that, as the name implies, are no longer rooted in the nation-state – and a vast, rapidly expanding and internationally interlocked financial system. The functioning of global capital today has so transcended the nation-state that it needs it only insofar as the nation contributes to profit maximization. By crossing national borders at will, it is able to play nation against nation to reduce both taxes and labor costs, and to find optimum investment opportunities. At the same time, it wages war against nation-state governments in its effort to remove any restrictions – environmental, social, or economic – that threaten maximum profit.

This situation is diametrically opposite from that of the earlier part of the past century when the nation-state was the protector of its indigenous capital. Fascism requires nationally-rooted capital because its only purpose is to protect that capital – fascism being, in fact, a nation-state response to a threatened nation-state capital. When capital transcends the nation-state, it cannot be rescued by any nation-state when it is in crisis. Therefore, fascism loses its function and becomes obsolete under the conditions of globalized capital.

What, then, does this mean for the current neo-fascist – or better, pseudo-fascist – movements responding to the crisis of capitalism? What is the point of “nationalism” today when the economy is beyond the control of the nation-state? The nation-state was created solely for the purpose of advancing indigenous capital. When capital is globalized, the nation-state loses its purpose and tends toward dissolution. The capitalist-directed EU is clearly a step toward this dissolution, and, as such, is vehemently opposed by the new “nationalist” parties. Were these parties to become successful in controlling nation-state governments, what then would they do with their “nationalism”? Attempt the impossible, regressive feat of restoring a nation-rooted capitalism isolated from global capital? The absurdity of this idea makes it clear that there is no survival today outside global capital, under whose control all production and distribution have been organized. These new right-wing movements have the talk of fascism without its substance in economic reality, and are therefore doomed. They are the voices of the ill-informed that cannot be heard by today’s capitalists, as they could have been eighty years ago.

There is an implication here that there are progressive elements in the globalization of capitalism. And there are. Taking the world economy out of the control of individual nation-states means that nations are no longer competing for economic ascendancy. Capitalism’s new global paradigm, by eliminating national competition, makes a repeat of the twentieth-century conflicts impossible. There will be no huge armies of competing capitalist nations confronting one another as in the two World Wars. It’s hard today to imagine Japan bombing a Nissan factory in Tennessee, or the U.S. leveling an Apple plant in China. Military operations are now of a different nature than those of the twentieth century. Today they take the form of civil wars in nations struggling to develop, localized “anti-terrorist” assaults like those the U.S. engages in, and localized repressions of political movements. Although huge death tolls, tragic displacement of populations, and massive property destruction result from these confrontations, none approach the devastation of the past century’s world wars.

If not fascist, what then is the nature of capital’s attack on government today and its attempt to control or eliminate it? Clearly, its goal is the antithesis to that of fascism, which is to strengthen and solidify the nation-state. Global capital wants to dilute the nation-state and its government insofar as that government represents the interests of the people in opposition to its own. The thrust is libertarian: governing is transferred to the anarchy of laissez-faire capitalism – the mystical “invisible hand of the market” – rather than to an authoritarian fascist state. And indeed, the most effective of today’s extreme right-wingers are libertarians. The Koch brothers do not offer us a charismatic leader and a powerful authoritarian state as did the fascists (they denounce Trump!), but a nebulous “freedom” allegedly available only in a world controlled solely by an unfettered, overarching global capitalism. Libertarianism is the political arm of the new, globalized, stateless capitalist economy – the reintegration of the political and economic systems under the rule of global capital, rather than the rule of the people, as would be the case in a socialist-type reintegration.
The capitalist forces striving for this end are powerful. They have already organized themselves globally through the overarching, non-democratically controlled International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Bank. They control the world's money and therefore the well-being of the people. They have made remarkable progress in co-opting governments to serve their interests – and ultimately render those governments impotent in the service of the people. They are intelligent in that they represent the best-educated classes. And because they wield global power they are ahead of the people who, lacking international organization, have power only through national and local governments that have increasingly fallen into capitalist hands.

Since economic organization through global capital far outpaces political organization that remains rooted in the waning nation-state, it would appear that the only course for the people is to take back their governments through democratic process and use these governments to create a global organization of the people that can match and confront the global organization of capital – with the possibility of integrating, at last, the political and economic systems under genuinely democratic control. This requires much consciousness-raising about the real causes of our economic problems, and massive grassroots organizing – which seems to have already begun. Short of this, capitalism's divide-and-conquer, nation-against-nation strategy will hold sway, to the continuing oppression of the world's people – an oppression that no longer needs fascism, but only capital itself.

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Bio
I am a political columnist residing in Vermont with articles appearing regularly in all of the state's leading newspapers, including The Burlington Free Press, Rutland Herald, Bennington Banner, and Manchester Journal. A long-time political activist and member of the Vermont Progressive Party, I have lectured on political economy at local colleges and have appeared as guest speaker on public TV shows. I have written the book, “Myths of Capitalism” (see: mythsofcapitalism.com).

Dear Colleagues,

I am pleased to announce a new URPE initiative: online teaching workshops. These are based on the very successful workshops I have conducted at ASSA meetings and at various universities around the United States.

The first online teaching workshop, on Constructing a Teaching Philosophy and Portfolio, is now available for all URPE members (with a current and activated online account). (If you have trouble logging in, please email Frances at urpe@urpe.org.) The workshop is designed to help graduate students and younger scholars prepare materials that could be used effectively in applying for a job (or preparing for a review) at a teaching oriented institution.

If this first workshop is successful, we plan to develop and add additional workshops on syllabus and course design, active learning, collaborative learning, models of pluralistic teaching, and more.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

In solidarity,

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Confounding all predictions (including my own), on 20 January 2017 the chief justice of the US Supreme Court will give the oath of office to president-elect Donald Trump. The shock of the unexpected has brought forward instant commentary from across Europe.

For Jeremy Corbyn the Trump victory represented an “unmistakable rejection of a political establishment and economic system that simply isn’t working for most people”. In a right-wing version of “a better world’s in birth”, Marie Le Pen tweeted “Their world is collapsing. Ours is being built”.

The regrettable truth is that Le Pen will prove closer to reality. Corbyn is correct to point out that Donald Trump played to the fears and anxieties of those Americans suffering from the many ill-effects of globalization. However, the likely consequences of Trump’s victory will be a strengthening of the neoliberal vision of a world economy dominated by corporate capital.

**Echoes from the past**

In May of this year in a London radio interview, US political expert Jeff Faux warned of the possibility of a Trump victory. While he expected a Clinton victory, Faux pointed out that her campaign promised a variation on the status quo, while Trump promised radical change to an electorate fed up with America as it is.

For 40 years US working class wages have stagnated, in great part as a result of the steady decline of manufacturing employment. It should come as no surprise that the share of American families defined as ‘middle class’ declined continuously over the same four decades. In the 1930s this combination, impoverishment of the working class and loss of middle class status, was central to creating the political environment for German fascism.

The other element in the rise of intra-war fascism, fear of communism, also has its current counterpart, the emergence of radical Islamic sects. Twentieth century fascists used “Bolshevism” to slander progressives of all varieties. In the same vein Trump repeatedly invoked fears of Islamic radicalism to slander all American Muslims as a Fifth Column undermining a Judeo-Christian nation. To deal with this imagined threat he advocated a “total and complete” ban on Muslims entering the United States.

From the outset of his presidential bid, the mainstream media characterized Trump’s appeal as ‘populist’, a vague but pejorative term rarely defined. The typical dictionary definition of populism describes it as “claiming to represent common people,” based on a belief in their “wisdom and virtue.” By this definition almost every political party qualifies as populist, since it is unlikely that any would deny that they represented the common people or considered them without wisdom or virtue.

In practice the media employs the term, often explicitly, to mean a politician or party that appeals to the ‘worst instincts’ of not the people as a whole but the lower classes of society. This use of ‘populism’ treats the lower-class masses as capricious and volatile, vulnerable to the inflammatory rhetoric of demagogues. In effect the common use of populism locates the success of demagoguery in the ignorance and lack of sophistication of the lower classes.

In the specific case of Donald Trump, his opponents and the media attribute his unexpected success not to the failure of the US political and economic system but rather to the reaction of the lower classes to that failure. Thus, the central narrative of the Trump phenomenon locates him as an aberration taking opportunistic advantage of the gullible losers of globalized economy.
By this interpretation Bernie Sanders would also fall under the populist label, another politician appealing to the unsophisticated and volatile masses. From the mainstream perspective, especially the media, Trump and Sanders represented different sides of the same populist coin, offering simplistic solutions to complex problems, one from the right, the other superficially of the left. From the perspective of the elites, they share the same sin, rejection of neoliberalism (apparent rather than real in Trump's case).

As used by the mainstream populism is a term to justify the political status quo. It is a defense of the infamous ‘middle ground’, tainting all challenges to the neoliberal ‘consensus’ as cynical and simplistic opportunism.

What it means

The Trump victory is not the rejection of neoliberalism but the necessary outcome of the neoliberal transformation. Since Jimmy Carter in 1976 the Democratic party has elected neoliberals to the presidency. Each successive Democratic president extended and deepened the neoliberal transformation of the US economy, weakening worker and trade union rights, facilitating the decline of manufacturing, and perhaps most important eliminating constraints on the financial sector.

From 1932 through 1968 the Democratic party won seven of nine presidential elections based on the New Deal coalition of the ‘solid South’ and the northern working class. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, resolutely championed by southerner Lyndon Johnson, lost the Democrats the South (as Johnson himself predicted). The neoliberal transformation initiated by Carter would alienate the working class. The legacy of the Civil Rights Act would prove key to the election of the next two Democratic presidents, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, as working class support for Democrats declined.

Pursuing essentially the same economic agenda, the Republican party differentiated itself through increasingly overt racism. Richard Nixon’s ‘southern strategy’ (1968), Ronald Reagan’s ‘welfare queens’ and George W. H. Bush’s overtly racist slander of Democrat Michael Dukakis (1988) firmly established the Republican party as the putative champions of white privilege. However, as working and middle class incomes continued to decline, the combination of racism and deregulated capitalism have become less effective in attracting votes.

By pursuing the same economic agenda the elites in charge of both the Democratic and Republican parties rejected the interests of the vast majority of Americans. Rising inequality of income and wealth continuously deleted the ranks of globalization’s winners. Clinton’s defeat of Sanders implied that yet again that the Democrats must go to the well of ‘identity politics’ for a victory strategy.

By 2016 erosion of the living standards of a majority of Americans meant that neither the Democratic nor the Republican version of deregulated capitalism had a constituency outside the elite. Trump, analytically or instinctively, realized that maintaining the economic status quo required a new strategy, a campaign against democracy itself.

In the 1930s Franklin Roosevelt, from one of America’s wealthiest families, recognized that to be democratic a capitalist system had to deliver material well-being to a majority of citizens. He constructed an effective electoral coalition, fatally flawed in the long run because of its southern racist component, and used it to limit the extreme abuses of capitalism.

Trump has no intention of limiting the abuses of capitalism, having innovatively engaged in extending and intensifying them. This leaves only one apparent way to maintain neoliberalism with all its destructive excesses: by restricting democracy. The superficially more respectable Republican politicians laid the ground for authoritarian rule by nullifying the protections of voter rights at the national, state and local levels.

Fulfilment of the neoliberal transformation to unregulated capitalism is incompatible with electoral democracy. A polity can have one or the other, but not both. The dark genius of Donald Trump lies in following this incompatibility to its logical conclusion — if his brand of capitalism and electoral democracy conflict, it is democracy that will be undermined.
URPE Brooklyn Conference

Left-Wing Economics in a Right-Wing Political Climate

April 8, 2017

St. Francis College, Brooklyn NY

The Conference will bring together the theoretical perspectives of radical political economics and the organizational experiences of those engaged in struggle on the many crucial issues confronting us today. It will, we hope, contribute to the development of an agenda that can guide all of us in the difficult years ahead.

Early registration: $30 per person; $15 for students.

Late registration (after March 18): $35 per person, $20 for students.

Note: All participants may choose to pay more or less depending on their individual circumstances. Registration fee includes cocktail party. (Alcohol will be served only to those aged 21 or over.)

Since space for workshops is limited, participants will be asked to sign up for specific workshops – those who register early will be given preference when attendance reaches rooms’ full capacity.

Online registration can be found at www.urpe.org

Workshops

Each workshop will include presentations on both the contribution of radical political economics to an understanding of the issues, and the current political activity relating to these. Approximately half of the two-hour period will be available for contribution from workshop participants. Each workshop will conclude with a collective summary of areas of agreement and disagreement and the nomination of one or two people to present this summary at the closing session of the conference. (URPE plans to record this final session and make it available on the URPE web-site.)

The following is a preliminary listing of possible workshops topics:

- Trump’s fiscal policy (tax policy and infrastructure spending)
- Income distribution: wages vs. profits
- The Fight for $15 and other labor issues
- Workplace organization – unions today
- Immigration and global capitalism
- Community organization and cooperatives
- Health care after Obamacare
- Student debt and the state of higher education
- Households and the care economy
- Black Lives Matter

It is assumed that all workshops will recognize the class, gender, and racial/ethnic dimensions of issues.

All URPE members, friends of URPE, and those whose work (not limited to that in educational institutions) involves the development and presentation of radical political economic theory, are invited to contribute to the presentation of radical political economic theory. The conference organizers also ask for help in soliciting input to the workshops from the activists whose work provides us with direction for our collective struggle.

Please register your interest in this conference, including nominations (or self-nominations) for workshop participants at www.urpe.org. This will contribute to the organization of the conference and ensure that you will receive updates on conference plans as they develop.