

American Elections: Rejection of The “Lesser of Two Evils” Is Always the Main Issue

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This is an unabridged English version of an interview with author Arnold August with Punto Final (Chile) in Spanish.

Let us talk about Cuba and Its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion (the most important aspects and/or conclusions of the book, and how did the idea emerge to write it, etc.).

THE GENESIS OF THE BOOK

The idea for this book arose from my previous experience writing *Democracy in Cuba and the 1997-98 Elections* (1999), which concentrated on the electoral process in Cuba. The goal at the time was to respond to the disinformation that there are no elections on the island. In order to write the text, I carried out my research on the spot. I attended every step of the electoral process, from the municipalities to the national Parliament. For the most part of this more than one-and-a-half-year investigation, I lived in the family home of a municipal delegate to the People’s Power. Being embedded in this way vastly deepened my approach to understanding the process from *within* and, along with my photos, allowed me to provide readers with a lively narrative. This work in Havana and in a rural area took place from September 1997 to February 1998. I was only one of two non-Cubans to have had access to the entire electoral process. This unforgettable professional experience resulted in the first book, in 1999. It was published in English and subsequently very well received through my conferences in the U.S., Canada and the U.K. You can imagine that, especially in the U.S., it raised many eyebrows. In that country, the preconceived view that there are simply no elections in Cuba is very ingrained. Nonetheless, in general, the book developed a following while also providing me with crucial input to further evaluate my analysis. Today, people in the U.S. still comment to me about that publication. However, despite the positive reception, I did notice that the U.S.-centric notion of democracy and elections lingers on, even with some people on the left.

Thus, the idea to write another book began to emerge. In the following years, I further studied democracy and elections in other countries (especially in the U.S. and Venezuela). This was interrupted by the need to study what I call “democracy in motion from the bottom up” in the U.S. (the Occupy movement), the Egyptian Revolution against the U.S.-backed military regime and the Indignados (outraged) in Spain against the two-party system domination. With these unexpected, but welcomed, new events (despite their drawbacks and weaknesses) and with input from readers in the U.S. on the first book, I began to orient myself toward a new approach. It would include an analysis of democracy as a concept, taking into account the above-mentioned experiences, evaluated by critically analyzing U.S.-

centrism, especially as it pertains to democracy. The goal was to strongly put forward the view that the U.S. approach to “democracy” is not the only one.

I am certain that *Punto Final* readers can appreciate a profound critique of U.S.-centric notions on democracy because of the bitter 1973 experience in Chile and other bloody U.S. interventions in the region in the name of, among other pretexts, “democracy.” Furthermore, there was a need to analyze in detail the real inner workings of elections and “democracy” in the U.S. based on an approach that is unique and therefore necessary. To deepen the concept, democracy is explored with a review of the participatory democracy experiences in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. In addition, there was a need for the Cuban approach to be illuminated through a more critical approach, in contrast to the previous book, so as not to idealize the Cuban political system. I also decided to investigate the actual functioning of the state in Cuba at the municipal and parliamentary levels after the elections, something that I did not do in the previous book.

To conclude my response to your question as to how the idea came about to write my latest book, I consider the publication to be a culmination of my active struggle and political thinking since my university days in Montreal in the 1960s. This involved a loathing of U.S. imperialism while fully supporting the peoples of the Third World against colonialism and imperialism. Thus, the plan for the book was emerging as my virtual political testament. It was published in English in 2013 and in Spanish in 2015.

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY: NEITHER THE MODEL NOR A “BOURGEOIS DEMOCRACY”

“Not a bourgeois democracy?” readers may ask – and rightly so. Of course, it is a “bourgeois democracy”; however, the first important aspect of my book is the analysis of how democracy and elections in Cuba’s neighbour, the U.S., *really* works. Thus, I am not in favour of the popular yet superficial conception that dismisses American “democracy” as bourgeois and the election campaigns as being a farce or a show. It is the easy way out. This approach avoids scientifically and painstakingly analyzing the inner workings of the system. How the system really operates from the point of view of the *grass roots*, rather than the stifling straitjacketed vision delimited by the spectacular rivalry of two parties, is bypassed. As will be discussed below, some commentators who relieve their conscience by accusing the U.S. of being a “bourgeois democracy” and a “show” have ended up supporting Clinton against Trump while remaining, consciously or not, oblivious to what is actually happening at the base in the U.S.

My approach is based on an original case study of the Obama phenomenon as a natural outgrowth of the American political system since the seventeenth century. How can one analyze the political process? The role of money in U.S. politics is well known to the extent that this phenomenon has taken its place in the American international public domain. It is no secret to anyone. The same applies to the notorious corruption in the political system and the cut-throat unprincipled competition between the two main parties. To concentrate on these features is to fall victim to the U.S.’s very *own* concept of their process. Harping on the issues presents no real challenge to the status quo. The money, corruption and competition are not the main characteristics. Thus, to be attracted to these attributes is to fall into the trap of the U.S.-centric view of their elections as its concept remains within the box delimited by the U.S. establishment. In contrast, I examine the process from the point of view of the base, rather than from the top. The only real issue at this time is the dead end of the “lesser of two evils” option or, rather, the non-option of having to choose one of two evils.

CONCLUSION: POLITICAL OPPORTUNISM AND CO-OPTATION

The first aspect of the book that I want to highlight, “American democracy,” one conclusion reached through my Obama case study is that all presidential elections, including the current one, are based on two features.

First, there is the insatiable *individual political opportunism* of a presidential hopeful. Second, as a precondition to being nominated and eventually elected, this person must firmly have demonstrated the capacity to *co-opt* sections of the electorate. This talent, linked to being endowed with personal characteristics (e.g., being black or a woman) must be sufficiently evident to the ruling circles not only to win enough votes, but to also effectively co-opt *after* the elections. The overall goal of the establishment is to avoid a revolt against the system by the people, first and foremost by African-Americans, who are traditionally the most left-wing and revolutionary force in that country. During the course of the electoral campaign, based supposedly on the capitalist motto of the “invisible hand of the free market” as applied to politics, at a certain moment the majority of the U.S. ruling class makes their choice. Following this, the “invisible fist” interferes in the “invisible hand of the free market” by taking action to assure the victory of their preferred candidate. In the case of Obama, at the point when Obama fully reassured the ruling circles (as fully documented in my book) that he was their man, immense funds flowed into the Obama coffers from the military, health insurance corporations and pharmaceutical companies, not to mention Wall Street. This support was fully backed by the majority of the main printed news media (in reality, part of that same corporate elite) as well as university student publications endorsing Obama.

In the 2006–08 period, the U.S. ruling circles were facing a major credibility gap domestically in the face of African-American resentment and anger as well as internationally in the wake of the Bush era. In terms of foreign affairs, Latin America’s growing left-wing movement, fomented by the Bolivarian Revolution, was of particular concern to important political figures who supported Obama in the 2006–08 period. The concern about all of the domestic and international credibility gaps indicated that Obama came in handy. He was not an innocent bystander, since he consciously flashed the right signals to the ruling elite. The decision to support Obama was surely the correct decision carried out by the ruling circle, as one can easily imagine how woeful the situation would have been for U.S. interests if John McCain/Sarah Palin or Mitt Romney/Paul Ryan would have won.

CONCLUSION: REJECTION OF THE “LESSER OF TWO EVILS” IS ALWAYS THE MAIN ISSUE

This brings us to the second conclusion in this section. The corporate media and their two main parties use the election campaign to promote the two-party system as the only choice. This goal is sacred, since its objective is to suffocate any burgeoning struggle for a left-wing progressive alternative. As a corollary, the U.S. implicitly or explicitly promotes “lesser evilism,” as it is very well known in U.S. progressive circles. The logic is that even if electors hate both parties and their respective candidates, they should vote for the “lesser evil.” As I was writing my book, I came across an analysis by Black Agenda Report, a website based in the U.S. They wrote that Obama is not the “lesser of two evils,” but the *more effective of two evils* in administering the program of the U.S. ruling circles.

Let us take foreign policy to elaborate how “lesser evilism” operates. In the text, I provide

the example of Honduras: Obama, the new face of imperialism, successfully carried out the coup d'état in 2009 soon after being elected for his first term in 2008. He was directly involved with Hillary Clinton in executing it, profiting from the illusion being propagated about a new U.S. diplomatic foreign policy combined with Obama deftly using verbal subterfuge as no McCain/Palin team in the White House could have done. The Honduran resistance was, of course, in a very difficult position from the beginning. However, the White House bought valuable time for itself in the international arena. It drew out the suspense by falsely claiming that Washington opposed the coup. Some governments in Latin America were also infected by illusions about Obama, thus depriving the heroic Honduran resistance with the regional support it so badly needed. Then came the Paraguay parliamentary coup. The book also shows the hand of Obama immediately after the April 14, 2013 Venezuelan Presidential elections in order to destabilize the country. Obama was interfering in Venezuela right up to 2015, when the Spanish edition of the book was published. There was resistance in the region, but it perhaps would have been far stronger if it had not been contained to a certain extent by U.S. imperialism's new Obama approach.

DOMESTIC SCENE: CO-OPTING AND PACIFYING AFRICAN-AMERICANS

The most important of Obama's legacies has been his relative capacity to co-opt some sympathy from African-Americans, who were feeling assured with a black person in the White House. As documented in my publication, his overture to blacks was skilfully written into both of his books (2004 and 2006) and two important 2012 campaign speeches dedicated to the race issue. While feigning empathy for blacks, he also sent the appropriate buzzwords to assure the ruling elite what they wanted to hear: the U.S. is a "post-racial society," that there is not a white America, a black America or a Latino America, but the United States of America. This startling illusion could only be uttered by the first African-American president as "proof" that the American Dream is more alive than ever. It is as if to say, "Look at me, I made it!" - conveniently overlooking the fact that his relatively privileged upbringing leaves the vast majority of African-Americans in the dust, to deal with poverty, discrimination and the racist violent state. Obama jumped into the White House on the trampoline of unbridled individual opportunism. His image, as documented in my book, was carefully groomed by a white Chicago political consultant who specialized in getting blacks elected to positions with already five victories to his credit at the time. Obama sat on the hairdresser's chair gleefully allowing the master to shape and camouflage his image to satisfy the needs of the ruling circles. This came in handy, for example, at the very beginning of the second Obama mandate in 2012, when young Trayvon Martin was assassinated by an armed vigilante in Florida. Obama went on TV to openly use the race card to try and co-opt the outrage among blacks and pacify them and their many allies.

This approach was combined with the subtle pursuit of impunity. For example, since the publication of the book, Obama's Department of Justice cleared the killer of Trayvon Martin and let him free. This de facto institutionalized impunity gave the green light to more police killings, as the world is aware. Obama is the worst phenomenon to ever happen to African-Americans. For example, he and Hillary Clinton used the outrage of black mothers whose sons or daughter were killed by police to speak at the July democratic convention in support of Obama's heir Hillary Clinton rather than supporting the Black Lives Matter in the streets in front of the convention venue. One of the mothers was Trayvon Martin's. We can thus ask the question: would this have happened if the president were a Republican? No. This seemingly paradoxical situation goes to the very heart of the dead-end nature of "lesser evilism."

The U.S. oligarchy repeats the refrain of U.S. exceptionalism. Well, I agree with them on one aspect only: the U.S. is the *only* country in the West (i.e., North America and Europe) that is based today on a racist violent state as a vestige of slavery. Thus, the U.S. is indeed an exception in this sense. No analyst or political force in the U.S., or internationally, can ignore this historical fact. The Obama legacy of co-opting and pacifying African-Americans, combined with impunity to police violence, is now carrying on into the Clinton campaign. She will win the presidency for one of the same reasons that catapulted Obama into power: Obama was called upon by the majority in the ruling circles to co-opt - or at least neutralize - African-Americans.

Therefore, the most important repercussion of “lesser evilism” consists of feverishly *delaying forever the struggle* at the base by boxing people into the dead-end of voting for one of the lesser of two evils. This perpetual postponement thus blinds the people to the need for revolutionary struggle with the goal of people’s power combined with voting for an alternative on the left of the two-party system.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN MUCH OF THE LATIN AMERICAN PRESS?

To answer this question, allow me to fast-forward to the current situation in the presidential election campaign, as I feel that readers should be aware of one regrettable phenomenon. As I work on this interview, I observe that in the U.S. there is very wide opposition from the left-wing and progressives. I am referring to the Green Party ticket, which has managed to take off after Bernie Sanders supported Clinton’s Democratic presidential nomination. The ticket is now composed of presidential nominee Dr. Jill Stein and Ajamu Baraka for Vice President. The latter is a regular contributor to Black Agenda Report, mentioned above, as well as to Counter Punch, one of the most important alternative websites in the U.S. that stands against the two-party system. As recently as August 18, 2016, Baraka said in an interview that he aims to continue the legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois and Malcolm X, two of the most important historic revolutionaries among progressive Afro-Americans.

This growing coalition also includes the Black Lives Matter movement, which some commentators in the U.S. say is becoming increasingly socialist. The flow can be observed on the streets via the many thousands of Twitter accounts, hundreds of serious alternative websites in turn supported by thousands of journalists, and self-financed alternative TV and radio programs.

The argument that voting for the Green Party ticket is futile because it cannot win in 2016 does not take into the account the current movement at the base and its future. Once the 2016 elections are over, will the grass-roots motion continue in the streets to put forward its demands, expose the two-party system for what it is and elevate the slogan of People’s Power to a prominent position? Will this groundswell and the further imploding of the two-party system open the path for the left-wing alternative possible gaining more headway? These and other questions should be available to all peoples who are interested in what is unfolding in the U.S.

Unfortunately, in much of the progressive or left-wing press in Latin America and the Caribbean, there are virtually no reports or analysis from this point of view of progressive opposition at the grass roots to the lesser of two evils. It seems that the few exceptions consist of revolutionary blogs, such as in Cuba. I am familiar with these blogs on the island; however, there are surely other progressive blogs in other Latin American countries. Thus, an important part of the mainstream progressive press deals with the situation within the

confines of the two competing parties. They more often than not provide a slightly modified version of the U.S. establishment's views but rendered in Spanish or Portuguese. In this context, the balance is often tipped in favour of Clinton. However, this optic is also to the detriment of the opposition from the left and progressive forces in the U.S. I am in no way suggesting that the foreign press take a stand on the U.S. elections. However, the way the trend is presently developing is de facto taking a stand in favour of the two-party system status quo. Morphing into the U.S. narrative is detrimental to the opposition that is developing at this time as never before. Yet, this censorship is keeping much of the Latin American population in the dark.

The alternative reporting and analysis in the U.S. is almost exclusively in English, but this is no excuse. In contrast, in my case and that of others, in order to investigate the Cuban political system, I do so in Spanish, in Cuba at both the official local and national levels and especially at the grass-roots level. For those Latin American journalists who cannot go to the U.S., this is no reason for not capturing what is really happening in the U.S. beyond the superficial reports and analyses that censor opposition to the two-party system. I personally do not travel to the U.S. very often either, but the many thousands of daily tweets and hundreds of stories in the alternative media and TV at the base tell the whole story to anyone who masters the English language. There have been so many decades of opposing U.S. imperialism in the south. Encouragingly, for the first time in decades, there is presently an awakening in the U.S. itself against the interventionist American Eagle that coincides with the electoral process. While this just and burgeoning antithesis to U.S. official domestic and foreign policy is not as radical as some (myself included) might hope for, it *is opposed* to the deadly U.S. imperialist war machine, the absolute rule of the oligarchy, the racist state violence, Trans-Pacific Partnership (or TPP, whose opposition to which Hillary Clinton plays lip service while everyone knows that she will push it through) and the violation of the Palestinian people's human rights - all of which both Clinton and Trump are part.

Many other examples highlight the contradiction between the status quo parties and the opposition. Allow me to provide you with one that could not be more vivid for the peoples south of the Rio Bravo. As all readers are aware, Obama and Hillary Clinton were responsible for the coup d'état in Honduras, the resulting regime and thus the assassination of activist Berta Cáceres. Berta was in the streets of Philadelphia in July in the company of the progressive opposition protesting the Democratic convention. In stark contrast, Obama, Clinton and their seemingly endless line of military spokespeople and sycophants were busy further consolidating the Democratic party of war and foreign interference. This was carried out through an almost unprecedented four-day spectacle, beating the war drums for stepped-up militarization, aggression, wars and international interference. This dangerous direction serves to pave the way for increased interference in Latin America. All this was staged live in almost 24 hours of TV coverage during four days on CNN to the frightening tune of American chauvinism, which paled in comparison to the Trump Republican convention the previous week. It seems to me that any effective progressive contention of this two-party oligarchy deserves the full attention of the left-wing media in the south.

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