

Corporate Oligarchy or People's Democracy: Countering the Elite Agenda

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Even the tepid and formulaic kind of democracy previously permitted in the United States is too constraining for the Lords of Capital. "In its arrogance, the oligarchy is exposing the class character of the state and providing left forces a potent weapon for building oppositional consciousness." For the Left, "it is absolutely necessary to maintain whatever democratic space still exists while struggling to expand those spaces and rights."

For more than a decade, radical analysis has provided reams of studies revealing the political and economic dominance of an increasingly narrow sector of the U.S. and European corporate and financial elite. However, the warnings and political implications of this domination have received little attention beyond radical and left circles. It took a [study](#) by Martin Gilens of Princeton University and Benjamin Page of Northwestern University – and the current best-selling book by Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* – both emanating from liberal academia – for the warnings and some of the political questions associated with the consequences of this domination to finally penetrate mainstream discourse.

The Gilens and Page study focused on the question of democracy in the U.S. and provided data demonstrating that ordinary people have little influence over a democratic process in the U.S. that has been captured by the corporate and financial elite. And while they did not use the term "oligarchy," it could be reasonably concluded from their data and arguments that the system they described had all of the characteristics of an oligarchy. Complementing this study is Piketty's more than 600-page analysis of the evolution of capitalism over the last 200 years. He concluded that the capitalist tendency towards concentration of wealth had resulted in the disproportionate holding of the world's wealth in the hands of a tiny minority of the capitalist class.

Unfortunately, the current popularity of the analyses offered by Gilens, Page and Piketty has not translated into a deeper understanding of the nature of the political challenge posed by the dominance of capital – at least not yet. Instead, comments from liberals indicate that many are still desperately holding on to the belief that the worst excesses of capitalist practices can be modified to ultimately serve the public good. For example, after demonstrating the looting by the capitalist class taking place under the current global neoliberal regime, Piketty cannot bring himself to call for even fairly modest reforms, such as the exercise of public power to rein in and control capital. Instead, he offers the tepid recommendation of a global progressive tax on capital.

But while liberals are engaged in conversation, the oligarchy has been moving to reinforce

its dominance by pre-empting any attempts to exercise democratic control over their corporate and financial power. Elite opinion and state policies over the last decade in particular suggest that the Western capitalist/imperialist oligarchy has concluded that democracy and the rule of law have now become unbearable constraints for the rule of capital. Even more threatening for the world's people is that the policies being pursued under the leadership of the U.S. show that in the midst of an irrecoverable global capitalist crisis, the U.S. is willing to turn to unregulated violence and the subversion of states – both democratic and non-democratic – in its pursuit of full-spectrum military and economic dominance.

The evisceration of democracy in the U.S., represented by decisions like the Supreme Court's in the McCutcheon case, ruling that federal caps on combined donations to candidates, parties and political action committees constituted an unconstitutional infringement on the right to free speech, is no more than the inevitable domestic expression of capital's global strategy. It reflects the position that continued capitalist hegemony requires removing all barriers preventing the complete dominance of political life by the corporate and financial oligarchy.

Supporting the coup in Honduras; subverting the democratically-elected governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Ukraine; backing terrorist jihadist forces in Syria and Libya; militarizing Africa; and negotiating "free trade" agreements that remove from democratic accountability transnational corporations, banks and international financial institutions – these are just some of the expressions of this global, anti-democratic, anti-people strategy.

The domestic expressions of the move towards the open dictatorship of capital are not just reflected in the McCutcheon and Citizens United cases, but also last year's Shelby v. Holder case, which gutted the Voting Rights Act's protection against efforts to undermine black political participation.

Along with the attacks on the structures and practices of formal democracy, the efforts on the part of the national security state to monitor, limit and disrupt lawful political opposition also have to be seen as a fundamental component of this anti-democratic strategy. The National Defense Authorization Act, which arguably gave the state the right to indefinitely detain U.S. citizens; the unrestrained police assaults on working class black and Latinos across the country; the increased collaboration between private security entities and the Department of Homeland Security, FBI and fusion centers – these are all part of the move toward neo-fascist capitalist rule.

James Petras captures the essence of the ruling class strategy and dilemmas related to democracy and international law:

"The empire-building offensive of the 21st century differs from that of the previous decade in several crucial ways: neo-liberal economic doctrines are discredited and electorates are not so easily convinced of the beneficence of falling under U.S. hegemony. In other words, empire-builders cannot rely on diplomacy, elections and free market propaganda to expand their imperial reach as they did in the 1990s. To reverse the retreat and advance 21st century empire-building, Washington realized it had to rely on force and violence."

The current task: Defending bourgeois democracy while transcending it

The call that many liberals are making to overturn the Citizens United and McCutcheon rulings and overhaul campaign financing are misguided. Campaign finance reform as part of a broader set of transitional demands for democratic reform is a legitimate issue to highlight, but it is not enough.

The issue is not campaign finance reform, but democracy.

It would be a historic mistake on the part of the left to believe that it can ignore the systematic undermining of bourgeois democracy and democratic rights. On a daily basis we see the abrogation or erosion of the rights to peaceful assembly and association (organize and protest), information and free speech, legal due process, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and confinement, not to mention the right to participate in government and elections and to be free from government invasions of privacy.

The idea embraced by the oligarchy that the continued rule of capital globally and in the U.S. can no longer be reconciled with the shell of democratic processes and rights, even as weak and narrow as those processes are, represents an existential threat to radical politics as the state increasingly moves toward subversion and repression.

To counter this increasing authoritarianism and attacks on democratic rights, progressive politics in the U.S. require that popular forces somehow maneuver between the contradictory positions of having to defend traditional bourgeois democracy and democratic rights while simultaneously advocating and organizing to go beyond its limitations and structures. Why? Because it is absolutely necessary to maintain whatever democratic space still exists while struggling to expand those spaces and rights.

Countering the anti-democratic elite agenda requires the building of broad-based alternative social blocs representing and grounded in labor, women's groups, environmental organizations, radical hip-hop, immigrant rights, LGBTQ communities, black liberation tendencies, indigenous sovereignty movements and other historically marginalized communities, on the basis of [people\(s\)-centered human rights](#), social solidarity and justice and participatory democracy in all aspects of life, including economic.

The struggle for democracy and democratic rights is becoming increasingly difficult with decisions like McCutcheon that have politically solidified the open collaboration between big capital and the State and narrowed the options for "normal" democratic oppositional forms of struggle. That collaboration reveals in graphic terms - more so today than before Citizens United, McCutcheon and all of the attacks on democracy - the true nature of what passes for democracy in the U.S. and the interests aligned to subvert it. In its arrogance, the oligarchy is exposing the class character of the state and providing left forces a potent weapon for building oppositional consciousness.

Building on those contradictions, the fight for democratic reforms and demands for authentic democracy with mass participation and popular sovereignty in all areas of life could potentially serve as one aspect of a basic left program that provides strategic points of unity for concentrating areas of left oppositional politics.

Democracy and democratic rights, even in its bourgeois form, was never a gift from the rulers. It was expanded through struggle, and it will only be through struggle that we are able to protect those hard won advances while we simultaneously build structures of popular power to transcend its limitations. These are the concrete, objective circumstances

that history has given us.

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