

# What is a DEMOCRACY?

The Empire and Inequality Report, no. 9  
by Paul Street; February 03, 2007 for ZNet



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melding of Barbara and George Senior, an especially vile and aristocratic family history<sup>14</sup> and fundamentalist Christianity (among other factors)--- is a terrible offense not just to popular democracy but even to responsible "constitutional republicanism" and to the principles of "polyarchy."

The current Messianic Militarist in-Chief and his overlord Darth Cheney are out of control in ways that understandably concern many among their super-privileged capitalist comrades. Responsible corporate republicanism may well require getting some kind of rational, ruling class butterfly-net over "The Decider" between now and the next presidential-selection extravaganza, when a less provocative and more balanced agent of elite class rule - one who is less messianic and obsessed with being the sole Decider - can be safely installed in the White House in (what will still be) the false name of democracy.

Maybe the ruling class will get its shit together enough to repair "the constitutional republic" (and the polyarchy). Don't hold your breath. Whatever, we should not look for the in-power elite to introduce anything like substantive and popular democracy. That is something that only we can do for and by ourselves and will mean challenging the underlying system and structures of capitalist and imperial rule.

## for and "DEMOCRACY" "THE REPUBLIC"

**T**hese are dangerous and confusing times. Let's take a look at an interesting formulation from an unusually long and dramatic lead editorial in a recent issue of liberal-left weekly "The Nation":

*"World opinion is against the US escalation in Iraq. The American people are against it. Congress is against it. The Iraqi government is against it. Can a single man force a nation to fight a war it does not want to fight, expand a war it does not want to expand? If he can, is that nation any longer a democracy in any meaningful sense? If not, how can democratic rule and the republican form of government rule be restored?"*

This ominous paragraph constitutes the cover of the magazine's "February 5th" issue ("The Nation" dates its issues a week in advance of the day you see them on the newsstand or in your mailbox).

Later in the editorial, "The Nation" says the following:

*"It is not only the Vietnam syndrome but the Watergate syndrome that [the Bush administration] want[s] to overcome. If the keynote of [Richard] Nixon's character was covertness (not for nothing was he called Tricky Dick), then the keynote of Bush's character is brazenness: he seeks to carry out in broad daylight, as his formal right, the usurpations that Nixon committed under the cover of night. Thus, the deepest theme of the whole three-decade story, now presented in almost outlandish caricature*

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<sup>14</sup>: Stephen Lendeman, "The End of the Bush Dynasty," ZNet Magazine, December 5, 2006, read at <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=11552>

*by the President's tug of war with the nation and the world over Iraq, is the issue of power and how it shall be constituted in the United States, and the deepest question the crisis presents is whether the country will continue to be a constitutional republic or bow down to the new system of one-man rule asserted by President Bush. It's an issue that must concern every citizen, and the antiwar movement is in fact reviving it."*

After some intelligent reflections on the need to combine efforts to de-fund and end the occupation of Iraq with citizen actions, resolutions, and investigations that could lead to impeachment, The Nation hopes that the American people and Congress can act together to save "the Republic"<sup>1</sup>

## KING GEORGE: TODAY:

It is good to see "The Nation's" editors' say forthrightly something that many of us on the left believe: that the United States is not in fact a functioning "democracy." Democracy, classically defined, means majority rule and the reign of the popular will. It entails broadly-based and widely empowered civic participation, de-centered power, and one-person, one-vote, with equal policy input for all people.

Bush's "surge" (escalation) obviously violates all that. It also violates the concept of a republic. A republic, according to Websters, is "a government in which supreme power resides in a body of citizens entitled to vote and is exercised by elected

<sup>1</sup>: "For the Republic," The Nation, February 5, 2007, pp. 3-5 and cover

inequalities in wealth and social privilege...The notion that there may be a veritable contradiction in terms between elite or class rule, on the one hand, and democracy, on the other, does not enter – by theoretical-definitional fiat – into the polyarchic definition."<sup>13</sup>

## for the REVOLUTION

If "The Nation" wants to talk simultaneously about the death of democracy and the need to save "the Republic" in the United States, it might want to clarify its definitions and look more deeply into the historical record. If by "democracy" it means – as does the radical democratic left – the classic popular-democratic tradition through its modern left-Marxian, left-populist and left-anarchist incarnations, then it should acknowledge that the U.S. has never really been a "democracy." It has been a capitalist republic and is perhaps today a corporate polyarchy.

If "The Nation" equates democracy with republicanism, then – problematic as leftists find that identification (the Republic was formed largely to keep the threat of [popular] democracy at bay) – it is on firmer ground insofar as it equates the reigning-in of Bush with the restoration of "democracy." Bush's actions on Iraq (and more) hark back to the Divine Right of Kings and violate core republican principles. The sneering, delusional and absolutist wannabe King George --- a product of 12/12/2000 (the day Bush II was installed in the White House thorough a partisan judicial coup) and 9/11/2001, too much booze and cocaine in the 70s, the toxic genetic

existence in this sector or that the masters of this sector exercise massive and disproportionate influence (so great that mainstream commentators like William Pfaff are not ashamed to proclaim the U.S. political system “a plutocracy”) over public policy and politics – even while insisting on keeping a strict firewall against the intrusion of public concerns and democracy into the “hidden abode” (Karl Marx on the capitalist workplace) of their private tyrannies.

- A strong emphasis on semi-representative and constitutional processes without concern for social and economic outcomes. The relevant U.S. constitutional authorities have ruled repeatedly against permitting the emergence of viable third (and fourth and more) parties that might challenge the corporate political duopoly (with the Democrats representing the left wing of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Party), attack the aforementioned firewall and advance democratic socioeconomic outcomes.

Calling this pseudo-democracy “polyarchy” (a term coined by the post-WWII U.S. political scientist Robert Dahl), Robinson describes the resulting plutocratic stew “a system in which a small group actually rules and mass participation in decision-making is confined to leadership choice in elections carefully managed by competing elites.” Under its corporate-polyarchic definition, “democracy is limited to the political sphere” (where it “revolves around process, method, and procedure in the selection of ‘leaders’”) and “is equated with the stability of the capitalist social order. By definitional fiat, power is exercised in the general welfare and any effort to change the social order is a pathological challenge to democracy...There is no contradiction...in affirming that democracy exists and also acknowledging massive

officers and representatives responsible to them and governing according to law.”<sup>2</sup>

Bush’s decision to escalate his messianic, monumentally illegal and massively unpopular (at home and abroad) war on the Middle East, combined with and linked to his brazen violation of numerous national and international statutes, is obviously out of touch with core principles of democratic and republican governance.

## annals of AMERICAN IMPUGNITY

**B**ut here we get to some fundamental problems relating to the difference between radical-left and liberal-left analysis and (as we shall see) between a “democracy” and “a constitutional republic.” When exactly was the U.S. a democracy, something that “The Nation” says it no “longer” is? When Bush and Cheney seized power with the help of a partisan and illegal Supreme Court in December 2000? When Tricky Dick Cheney and Deceptive George Bush (who rely on plenty of secrecy and covert skullduggery) lied the nation into the initial invasion of Iraq, over and against mass popular opposition? When Bush pushed through massive tax reductions for the wealthy few, falsely billing his remarkable gifts to the plutocracy as “middle class tax cuts?”

When the new President Bill Clinton abandoned his campaign commitment to “put people first” and proceeded to follow a business-friendly corporate neo-liberal agenda? When he attacked Serbia under false claims of humanitarian concern?

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When the recently departed and (historically white-

<sup>2</sup>: Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, p. 1001

washed) Gerald Ford gave Nixon an advance and total pardon, attacked Cambodia and approved Indonesia's nearly genocidal invasion of East Timor?

When John Fitzgerald Kennedy initiated an illegal war of aggression against Vietnam while wiretapping Martin Luther King, Jr. and pressuring the civil rights movement to "cool it"? When President Lyndon Baines used his famous Gulf of Tonkin fabrications to dramatically escalate the mass-murderous assault on Vietnam, while continuing the aforementioned wiretapping?

When Harry Truman lied about the "international communist threat" in Greece to "Scare the Hell out of the American people" so that they would accept the permanent imperial re-militarization of U.S. society and policy - helping thereby to sustain and expand the powerful "military industrial complex" that Dwight Eisenhower left the White House warning Americans about?

When Truman and two key members of his cabinet "systematically deceived Congress and the public into thinking that the USSR was about to launch World War III with an invasion of Europe in 1948" in order "to push through their foreign policy program, inaugurate a huge military buildup and bail out the near bankrupt airline industry?"<sup>3</sup>

When U.S. forces helped rebuild fascist power structures in occupied Italy and Washington planned military interventions against left electoral victories in post-WWII Europe?

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt's State Department voiced its approval of European fascism - as (what they considered) an understandable

ity-centered elections in which an only periodically and partially mobilized and semi-participatory "people" get to intermittently choose their merely political rulers from a generally narrow spectrum of capital-vetted business candidates whose fealty to core capitalist values is enforced by numerous mechanisms. The mechanisms include (but are not restricted to) the giving (or withholding) of large-scale political funds (required to mount serious campaigns by purchasing and developing expensive advertisements on corporate media), the seductive lobbyist-industrial-complex, the offering (or withholding) of lucrative employment opportunities to former politicians and public officials, and the public relations liquidation of candidates and public officials daring (and/or foolish) enough to question corporate rule and policy. It's about elite governance purportedly "for the people," and never actually "by the people." It's called "dollar democracy" - the "best democracy than money can buy" or, more bluntly, "plutocracy."

- The existence of a bourgeois constitutional order in which the legislative and judicial branches of government are empowered to exercise some reasonable restraint on the power of the executive and in which the "rule of law" is sufficiently entrenched for the accumulation of capital to proceed without too much profit-disrupting interruption.
- The restriction of this so-called "democracy" to the political sphere. There is no effort to exercise any measure of popular input, or check upon, the tyrannical powers that be in the private economic sector. Never mind that ordinary citizens experience most of their material

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<sup>3</sup>: Frank Kofsky, Harry S. Truman and the War Scare of 1948 [New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1993]

among the propertyless and property-poor multitude. Interestingly enough, one of the grievances against King George listed in the Declaration of Independence accuses the British monarch of 'exciting domestic insurrection among us.'<sup>11</sup>

## POLY-ARCHY

**R**eflecting the disproportionate influence of the wealthy capitalist few in the industrialized world's most unequal state, it should hardly be surprising that leading U.S. policymakers, experts, "democracy promoters," and commentators do NOT accept the popular, ultimately anticapitalist definition of democracy.

What do these authorities mean when they proclaim their faith in American "democracy?" U.S. foreign policy rhetoric notoriously uses the word democracy - as well as related words and phrases like "freedom," "liberty," "respect for the rule of law" and "civilization" - to characterize the purported basic goal and purpose behind pretty much any and all U.S. policies and actions, no matter how authoritarian, regressive, illegal, and savage those policies may be.

Putting that unpleasant fact further aside than may be appropriate, we can identify four basic and limited (from a popular-democratic perspective) constituent elements of what passes for "democracy" in ruling U.S. doctrine:

- The periodic holding of staggered and heavily corporate crafted, money-driven and personal-

response to, and check on, the European left?<sup>4</sup>

When the Robber Barons ruled over the Billion Dollar Congress? When President McKinley advanced false claims to launch an imperial war for territorial conquest in the Caribbean and Pacific? When President Polk lied the nation into an annexationist war of aggression against Mexico?

When Andy Jackson smashed the U.S. Bank and announced the rule of "the people" even as the "market revolution" concentrated ever more wealth in capitalist hands and reduced millions to poverty and "wage slavery" - all while Native American were being finally cleansed from the eastern and middle sections of the country and literal black cotton slavery expanded across the quasi-feudal South to feed the Satanic mills of Dickensian England?

When the corporate-Jacksonian Reagan administration traded arms for hostages and claimed that the United States was threatened by tiny and "Communist" Nicaragua (and the related menace of Marxist Grenada) while smashing U.S. labor and slashing taxes on the wealthy few?

## DEMOCRACY *against* CAPITALISM

**B**ut then what exactly do we mean when we say "democracy?" Like numerous other loaded terms ("freedom," "liberty," "the general welfare," etc.), democracy is a quint-essentially contested concept. It is a word for which different and competing definitions can be found, reflecting the intrusion of social power complexities into the supposedly neutral and elementary

<sup>11</sup>: Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>: Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1992], pp. 37-42)?

realms of language and vocabulary.

The definition I gave above (in this article's sixth paragraph) carries radical connotations when it taken seriously. Consistently followed and applied, it is incompatible with capitalism.

This is for simple reasons. The capitalist system that western and U.S. ideology falsely conflates with "democracy" rests upon a core basis of tyranny in daily material and economic life. With its definitional attachment to private ownership of the means of production and distribution, its inherent tendency towards concentration and centralization of wealth and power, and its progressive reduction of most people to dependent wage-earning (labor-power-renting) status, capitalism is deeply authoritarian at core. It's about "survival of the fittest," the subordination and exploitation of the "unfit" and the "Winner-Take-All" concentration of resources and power. It's about private appropriation of the social product.

Its basic but hidden idea of an efficient and desirable social outcome is the enhancement of private profit at the least possible private expense. It relentlessly pushes the maximum possible externalization of costs onto an ever more overburdened society and ecology.

It's fairly absurd to tell people that they are living under democracy because they occasionally pass through narrow-spectrum voting booths when they spend most of their lives under the material dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. The publicly disastrous "private" economy retains enormous autonomy from public interference under the functional rules of capitalism, which impose a deep structural division between the "political" and "economic" spheres in ways that make merely "political democracy" relatively irrelevant<sup>5</sup> - a

cans and propertyless white males at the time. It set up elaborate checks and balances to prevent the possibility of the common people making policy in a direct fashion. It omitted any mechanism of direct popular accountability between elections and introduced a system of intermittent and purposefully staggered elections to discourage focused electoral rebellions by the majority. It create an aristocratic Supreme Court appointed for life with ultimate de facto veto power over legislation that might too clearly bear the plebian input of the popular masses. The Electoral College was installed to guarantee that the popular majority would not select the President even on the limited basis of one vote for each propertied white make person.

As the openly authoritarian state-capitalist Alexander Hamilton explained in Federalist no. 35, the common people were incapable of serving in Congress and found their proper political representatives among the wealthy merchant class. "The weight and superior accomplishments of the merchants," Hamilton explained, "render them more equal" than "the other classes of the community," including the "mechanics" (artisans), whose "habits in life have not been such as to give them those acquired endowments" required for meaningful participation in "a deliberative assembly" and thereby made "useless" to "representative democracy."

The Founders' philosophy of what they called "popular government" was not simply one of partial, limited, or "watered-down" democracy. British authorities charged that the American independence movement would breed mass rebellions against property and authority in North America, but the Founders understood their republic to be more effectively antidemocratic than European absolutism, which bred "wicked" and "improper"

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<sup>5</sup>: Ellen Meiksens Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*[Cambridge University Press, 1995]

own the country ought to govern it." They may have diverged on numerous questions, but they agreed on a basic principle: the common people, with little or no property, must not have too much power. "In their minds," historian Richard Hofstadter noted in his classic study *The American Political Tradition* (1948), "liberty was linked not to democracy but to property" and democracy was a dangerous concept "sure to bring arbitrary redistribution of property, destroying the very essence of liberty." New England minister Jeremy Belknap stated nicely the basic idea behind the Founders' authoritarian notion of "popular government." "Let it stand as a principle," he told an associate, "that government originates from the people, but let the people be taught...that they are not able to govern themselves." For all but one of "the Republic's" constitutional framers (James Wilson), Jennifer Nedelsky notes, "property was the main object of government" and the people were "a problem to be contained."<sup>9</sup>

Consistent with these sentiments, widely evident in Hamilton and Madison's *Federalist Papers*<sup>10</sup>, the nation's rich white fathers crafted a government marvelously designed to keep the nonwealthy masses distant from the levers of power and to preserve and expand existing inequalities of wealth and power. The Constitution divided the government into three parts, with just one-half one of those three sections (the House of Representatives) elected directly by "the people" - a category that naturally excluded blacks, women, Native Ameri-

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<sup>9</sup>: Nedelsky, *Private Property and the Limits of American Constitutionalism* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990]

<sup>10</sup>: Paul Street, "By All Means, Study the Founders: Notes From the Democratic Left," *The Review of Education, Pedagogy & Cultural Studies* [volume 24, no.4, October-December 2003]: 281-302

problem deepened by capitalism's inherent tendency to "globalize" economic life and decision-making beyond the scope of territorially bound, place based jurisdictions, including even entire nation states.

During the 1830s and 1840s, the United States supposedly entered the Age of Democracy and the Common Man because voting rights were extended to all white U.S. males, regardless of their wealth and election campaigns became boisterous public affairs with a large degree of mass engagement.

The ugly fact that millions of adult white females and black chattel (not to mention First Nations people) lacked voting rights was not the only anomaly for the era's popular-democratic pretensions. Equally significant was the market and early industrial revolutions' roles in concentrating more and more material power into private bourgeois hands, rendering the public sector less relevant than ever in the management of economic life and the distribution of material rewards and power. The state and politics were opening up to an unprecedented level of popular contestation and (perhaps) input at a time when the state's power to shape real-life circumstances and social relations was receding in the face of "free market" advance. The market's glorious "progress" included the ruthless, unremitting and socioeconomically authoritarian proletarianization of millions of "free" white males.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the holders of capitalist wealth are never content to restrict the wielding of their vastly disproportionate economic power to the private and economic sphere. Reflecting the business community's natural desire to cover all bases in their quest for wealth and security, the considerable utility of the state as an arm of capital and capitalists' fear that government could be used for and by popular and social democrats, leading

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<sup>6</sup>: David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States With Democracy and the Free Market During the Nineteenth Century* [Cambridge, 1993]

private wealth-holders make sure to invest heavily in politics, policy, and the bribery and indoctrination of the public and its supposed representatives. This regular and ongoing investment has yielded a rich historical windfall of governmental labor repression, radical suppression (Haymarket, Red Scares, McCarthyism and COINTELPRO, etc), state subsidy (e.g. the granting of public airwaves to concentrated private media) and protection, natural resource appropriation, imperial defense for overseas investment, and much more. The windfall is generally supplied by policymakers who have been trained and conditioned to see the world through the eyes of the “economic elite” and thus to reject the popular definition of democracy.<sup>7</sup>



equality, and not only or simply with the outwardly democratic process of elections and the existence of (not-so) “popularly” selected officeholders. The meaningful pursuit of that outcome “entails a dispersal of political power formerly concentrated in the hands of elite minorities, the redistribution of wealth, the breaking down of structures of highly concentrated property ownership, and the democratizing of access to social and cultural opportunities by severing the link between access and the possession of wealth.”<sup>8</sup>

## POPULAR DEMOCRACY

That definition is “traceable,” the left sociologist William I. Robinson notes, “to the literal, classical Greek definition of democracy as the rule, of power (cratos), of the people (demos).” It “posit[s] a dispersal throughout society of political power through the participation of broad majorities in decision-making. [It] conjoins representative government to forms of participatory democracy that hold states accountable beyond the indirect mechanisms of periodic elections” and pursues “the construction of a democratic social order.”

In order to be relevant, the popular-democratic model holds, “democracy” must be “a tool for changing unjust economic structures, national as well as international.” It is strongly concerned, therefore, with the substantive outcome of social



## the REPUBLICAN VISION: “THE PEOPLE ARE NOT FIT TO GOVERN THEMSELVES”

Robinson’s characterization of classic popular democracy is a good description of the historical project of the radical-democratic left. It is well to the left of the republican thinking that guided the construction of “the Republic” in the late 18th century.

The Founders included some brilliant individuals, but their brilliance was harnessed largely to the cause of antidemocracy. Drawn from the elite propertied segments of a deeply stratified society, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention shared their compatriots John Jay’s and John Adam’s view that “the people who



<sup>7</sup>: for example Barack Obama’s book *The Audacity of Hope: thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* [2006]

<sup>8</sup>: William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony* [Cambridge, 1996], pp. 57-58]