
THE DEMOCRATS:
RIGHT OR LEFT?

The Eclipse of the Democratic Party

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Only very rarely in the history of American politics has so large a series of changes in the foundations of public policy been adopted as during 1981. Virtually without exception, previous policy shifts of this magnitude have been crucial symptoms of critical realignments. This was so following Jackson's victory in 1828, Lincoln's in 1860, McKinley's in 1896, and Franklin Roosevelt's in 1932. The one major exception, however, is the most recent: the enormous tidal wave of program innovations unleashed during the "Great Society" years under Lyndon Johnson (1965-1966). This fact alone should serve as a warning not to jump too quickly to the conclusion that a generation-long Republican-conservative millenium is now at hand. Its implications, which we shall review below, suggest still more reason for caution. It seems equally likely that the liberal policy breakthrough of 1965-1966 and the conservative ascendancy of 1981 represent, in turn, not critical realignments of a classic type, but further stages in a general crisis of the regime as a whole, and hence of the socioeconomic system which undergirds it.

Evidence from the commercial polls does not give much support to any notion that the electorate underwent a strong *ideological* shift to the right in the 1980 election. Outside the South, at least, turnout declined somewhat as it has declined in each election since 1960. By 1980—again, excluding the South—this led to the lowest participation rate since 1924. Moreover, a quite exceptional proportion of voters floated from one candidate to another; the break of many of them toward Reagan near the very end made the presidential outcome a much more decisive Republican victory than most had anticipated. Associated with this were strong signs that the swing was fuelled much more by repulsion from Carter than attraction to Reagan. Finally, while only 11 percent of Reagan's voters chose him because "he is a real conservative," i.e., on some sort of ideological basis, 38 percent gave as their reason for support that "it's time for a change."

At the end of the day, Reagan won 28 percent of the potential electorate—rather *less* than Wendell Wilkie garnered while losing decisively to Franklin Roosevelt in 1940. On the other hand, Jimmy Carter won a scant 22.6 percent of the electorate. The question virtually forces itself—what kind of “majority party” is it whose incumbent president cannot win the support of much more than one-fifth of the potential voters? In the present state of our knowledge, the best general explanation of the 1980 result in the short term is that it constituted a *landslide vote of no confidence in an incumbent administration*, of the sort which has happened before in 1920, 1932, 1952, and (in a relatively concealed way) in 1968. But it also appears to have gone rather beyond even this. It includes that most amorphous but decisive event in American political history—a general mood swing not just against an incumbent president, but against the established order of things and consequently against the party which had been in the majority in Congress during the preceding fifty years. Accordingly, most voters may well not have been involved in ideological choice (as is usually the case in this country), but their choices put people in power who were determined to make this election serve ideological purposes, to create political facts *en masse*, and thus to change the entire face of American politics. After full congressional approval of the President’s budget and tax proposals, these men and women are well on their way to achieving their purposes and accelerating the general crisis of the regime.

The implications of both the election and the administration victories require some particularly careful reflection. It cannot be sufficiently stressed that the new conservative administration has been engaged in *comprehensive change* in public policy. This change follows the internally consistent premises of conservative economic ideology. One of the most ancient chestnuts of conventional wisdom about the American political process is that comprehensive policy change is extremely difficult to bring about. Historically, such change has occurred in the context of really acute crises and/or abnormally overwhelming majorities in Congress for the party initiating the change: again, as in 1861, 1933, and 1965. Of course, dynamic and purposeful presidential leadership was also available to each of these change-bent coalitions. But it would seem that never in the past has such leadership made such great strides with so little in the way of acute crises or large congressional majorities as has Reagan in 1981.

This becomes still more striking in view of the recent scholarly and journalistic literature that has documented the rapid decay or “dealignment” of the party system as a whole since about 1960. Confirmation is abundant from the statistics and surveys of the 1980 election that, so far as the electorate is concerned, “party decomposition” is still underway and may even be continuing to develop. For example, Gallup reports a higher percentage of split-ticket voting in 1980 than in any of the preceding three elections, including even 1972. Yet there is an extreme gap between what has been going on in party-in-the-electorate on one

hand and party-in-Congress on the other. The Reagan victories on budgetary and tax legislation were solidly based on monolithic, almost total support from the congressional Republican party. The Democratic defectors in the House formed less than one-third of that party's membership. But, in the presence of a solid Republican phalanx, it was enough.

More generally, the impression is widely current that the Republicans of 1981 were solidified behind a coherent sense of purpose, while the Democrats were—and still are—in much more extreme disarray than even the 1981 House rollcalls would suggest. It might be supposed by some that all such discussion adds up to little more than certain intellectual bandwagon effects associated with clear-cut victory and equally clear-cut defeat. But there is a great deal of reason to believe that the Democratic party really has become degenerate to a degree quite without parallel on the other side. A closer look strongly suggests that what analysts have seen as “party decomposition” in general is in fact *Democratic* party decomposition. This decay has passed through several stages, associated with each of the fundamental crises now facing the American state. As usual, its extent—and the contrast with resurgent conservatism—is most visible at the intellectual level. At the level of policy, it is reflected in such strange responses to Republican-created political facts as the Democrats' 1981 initiatives in giving the oil industry and other capitalist interests more tax advantages than even the Reagan administration had originally proposed.

What does this all add up to? Political parties do not exist in a social or economic vacuum. Taking its components together, the party system is the reflection of all major conflicting political interests that are capable of organization (and self-consciousness) at any given time and place. If the Republicans of 1981 were a more nearly-monolithic legislative bloc than any party has been for decades, that is because they had an urgent collective agenda that can only be realized through comprehensive political (and hence policy) change. This collective agenda can be summarized most concisely by identifying it for what it is—the revitalization of a capitalist mode of production that is under serious and accumulating stress. The *political* situation in its turn can be best summarized in the following way. By any comparative standard, the Republican party is a Right that has increasingly acted like a Right, and is supported by a corps of enthusiastic organic intellectuals who are generating appropriate ideology. Something in the present situation—a something that we shall analyze below—has precipitated a fusion of the Republican party in Congress behind a single program of the Right that escapes easy comparison with anything of the sort in recent American political history.

But if the Republicans are a Right, the Democrats are in no way a Left. Rarely in recent years has the Democratic party acted less like a Left, in any comparative sense, than during the 1970s, and notably during the administration of Jim-

my Carter. Instead of a Left, we find on one side a welter of conflicting groups held together by increasingly tenuous historic loyalties (and antagonism to Republicans); and on the other, a vast and growing "party of nonvoters," sociologically concentrated precisely where, in other countries, leftist parties can be found. In a very real sense, Republicans in the United States enjoy advantages similar to those of the Central Powers in World War I: internally much more cohesive ethnically and economically than their much larger but chaotically diffuse opponents, they can readily fight "on interior lines" and defeat that opposition in detail: 28 percent beats 22 percent, hands down.

What remains—no small task—is to explain how so extraordinary a turnaround could have occurred; and how it is that the party system looks as it does in 1982.

The history of the postwar era in the United States can be conveniently subdivided into two periods of roughly equal length—the first extending from 1945 to about 1963 ending with John Kennedy's assassination, and the second from 1963 through 1980–1981.

During the first era, the United States developed and enjoyed a uniquely favorable position in the world. It established an economic and geopolitical empire, "the free world." Moreover, at least beginning with the Korean War, it set apparently successful limits to the expansion of the rival imperial network, communism. "Police actions" and imperial *limes* (boundaries) warfare, when necessary, were either relatively or absolutely successful. At the same time, it was evident by the late 1950s that the development of decolonization in Africa and Asia created vacuums known as "emerging nations" that communism might well fill; hence the extreme interest in "political development" and counterinsurgency by Democratic intellectuals and activists during the Kennedy period.

On the sheer economic plane, one central aspect of sovereignty was the reign of the dollar in international trade, which lasted from Bretton Woods in 1944 until the practical abrogation of that agreement in 1971. Associated with this were the growth of multinational corporations (most of which were based in the United States) and the rapid shift in American investments from the Western Hemisphere to Europe.

The domestic economy of the United States profited immensely from the uniquely favorable consequences of World War II: the prostration of all other major industrial systems outside the USSR, and, at home, a pent-up demand that extended back not just to the outbreak of war in 1941, but to the outbreak of depression in 1939. Debt-assets ratios were extremely (if decreasingly) favorable to liquidity. The "debt-economy" grew rapidly. Yet except for a very temporary upsurge in prices during the Korean War, inflation simply did not exist as a

serious problem of American investors or consumers. The relative economic position for average Americans around 1950 and around 1980 can be summarized by one little item. In 1950, about 70 percent of all American families could afford (if often with great difficulty) to purchase a house. By 1980, first-time home-owning remained a possibility for far less than one-quarter of families seeking household formation. By the mid-1960s, a striking increase in mass affluence had been achieved in the United States. Rates of profit appear to have been quite high in this period, with only one economic slowdown (much milder than those of the 1970s) in 1957-1958.

Associated with this was the striking absence of social-issue conflict during this period. The traditional American culture was largely intact. It was a time of religious revival. Apart from a tiny group of "beats," there was no counterculture. There was no youth revolt, either against the draft or anything else. Homosexuals were still closeted, and abortion, of course, simply did not exist as a national issue. Perhaps most important of all, the civil-rights movement was in its infancy, and effective black agitation for a better deal through governmental intervention was overwhelmingly confined to the South. Even this, as the conflicts that swirled through the Kennedy administration over civil-rights cases in the South made very clear, was enough by the end of the period to produce a full-scale disruption of the overwhelmingly white coalition which FDR had brought into being.

If the culture was still predominantly "square" in this period, positive trust in government was also very high by later standards. This was the golden age of *Civic Culture* celebrated (in 1963) by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba; an allegiant-participant political culture marked by much higher levels of citizen competence, trust, and positive affect than was evident in other countries such as Italy and Mexico. This positive affect was, however, linked to a state with far fewer domestic functions than those we recently took for granted, at least until 1980-1981. About three-quarters of the budget was spent on what might be called a mixture of "imperial" and "traditional" functions (defense, international relations, debt service, and the like), and only one-quarter on all social-welfare expenditure, including social security.

In general, it can be said that public support for government and its leaders was high—at least in considerable part—because what the state did was pretty much limited to activities about which there was wide public consensus. Dwight D. Eisenhower may be said to have been a near-perfect president for such an era.

The second period in American postwar history, beginning about 1963, has been increasingly marked by crisis in all four dimensions: the economy, the empire, the cultural system, and the state. To be sure, this general crisis spread gradually, with uneven tempo from sector to sector, and with quite different short-term tensions and conflicts within each sector over time. But by the late 1970s, it

had become general and intense enough to generate very widespread and acute feelings of distress among American elites and voters alike.

Ever since 1945, public policy in most of the west had been oriented toward the promotion of mass consumption, as one important means for ensuring that the deadly international economic (and geopolitical) anarchy of the 1930s never recurred. In the United States, this set of policies was for obvious reasons primarily designed to promote mass consumption in the private sector until the mid-1960s. One case in point involved the legal arrangements adopted to create a "protected" capital market for housing, with correspondingly low rates of interest on home mortgages. In Europe, welfare-state commitments began earlier and became an integral part of state budgets sooner and more fully than was the case in the United States. But the basic choices were quite similar: the stimulation of mass consumption markets at home and free trade within the capitalist world as a whole, based upon permanent, institutionalized economic growth primarily generated by the private-capitalist sector.

With the upward shift in the rate of increase in real disposable income after 1960, two things tended to happen in the United States. First, politicians increasingly "discovered" the continued, widespread existence of poverty and its growing concentration in the central cities. Second, the accelerated growth of wealth led political leaders to adopt programs designed to promote very rapid growth in domestic social-consumption expenditures. The consequence was the creation of a dense network of transfer-payment and regulatory programs at just the time when the competitive position of American capitalism in the international free market began—at first imperceptibly—to deteriorate. Even with relatively satisfactory rates of economic growth, the need to preserve social harmony through governmental expenditures had begun to lead to what James O'Connor quite correctly calls the fiscal crisis of the state. It also increasingly led to growing conflicts among sectoral groups and eventually among classes, as the surplus began to disappear. By the mid-1970s, the declining international position of American capitalism and an accelerating inflation had begun to present the old economic contradiction: the needs for capital accumulation and for consumption could no longer be satisfied simultaneously.

At the same time, the Vietnam War drastically accelerated the development of crises in all four sectors. A classic "liberals' war," it constituted yet another attempt to defend the imperial *limes* against Communist incursions, but this time in conditions radically different from those of the Korean conflict. Its failure was accompanied by a rupture of the cold-war consensus in public opinion which had prevailed since the late 1940s. The instruments of imperial policy, the military and the CIA, were seriously discredited in the wake of this lost war. Military spending as a percentage of the gross national product fell after the war's end from a little more than 10 percent of GNP to about 5 percent in the late 1970s.

The use of the military draft during the Vietnam War discredited it too, and was a major stimulus to the massive student protests of the late 1960s. It was abolished and a volunteer army, increasingly black and lower-class white in composition, was established.

The American cultural system clearly and remarkably unravelled from the mid-1960s onwards. The manifestations of the ensuing cultural crisis included, but extended far beyond, the rise of militant group-consciousness among blacks, other racial minorities, feminists, youth, and homosexuals. The American state, in its usual way, responded to the demands of these groups once they were organized. The Democratic party, in its platforms from 1972 onwards, responded even more fully.

Extending even beyond these movements lay a massive shift in cultural mores toward hedonism and away from the self-repression on which capitalist accumulation must significantly depend. As Daniel Bell—no radical—has convincingly pointed out, there are fundamental contradictions here. Modern or “late” capitalism depends upon mass consumption and the stimulation of wants through advertising to maintain an adequate market volume for its products. Yet productivity and profitability are dependent upon cultural norms that encourage the postponement of consumption gratifications: saving rather than spending. Hedonism has been carrying the day against neo-Victorian renunciation, and the cultural contradictions of capitalism intensify.

Connected with this is the central importance of the nuclear family in the reproduction of a coherent capitalist social order. The cultural changes involved have raised serious threats to the integrity, perhaps the survival, of this essential unit. This, coupled with the continuing extraordinary importance of traditional Christian religion in American society as a whole, provides some important reasons for the large-scale social-issue countermobilizations against abortion, homosexuality, and drug-taking among the young.

These crises matured across the 1970s in ways that are well known. As early as the mid-1970s, *Business Week* and other business publications foretold that a showdown was coming between accumulation and consumption, and therefore that a first-rate political crisis was at hand. In 1980, the point was driven home by the economist Lester Thurow. In a zero-sum society with little prospect for growth in the near future, stark choices would have to be made—particularly by the state—between some groups of Americans and others. Gains in income for one group would tend to be purchased at the expense of losses for another.

Thurow doubted that the political regime in the United States was capable of making such choices, and no wonder. The party system had decayed. A plethora of organized interests had developed, each claiming something from Congress and most getting something of what they wanted. It had been apparently impossible to organize an energy policy, despite the acute dangers involved in

letting this area drift. More generally, the American constitutional scheme permits and encourages the development of “iron triangles” and little agglomerations of power—fragmented, morselized, and feebly or not at all articulated with each other.

The American political-capitalist state, like all others, seeks social harmony through public expenditure. But because this is an American state, with a constitution designed to fragment power, a culture that has a remarkably weak sense of collective public good, and a decayed party system, the consequence over time is to produce a kind of energized, pluralist feudalism. This in turn is based paradoxically enough upon the extension of private-enterprise values to the public sector itself. It is hardly surprising that Professor Thurow and others might well believe that comprehensive policy in such a system is out of the question—that quite literally you can’t get there from here.

But the plot thickens. Ronald Reagan has demonstrated—for good or ill—that it may be quite possible to get there from here, at least so long as you are willing to travel in a rightward direction. The convergence of crises affecting the United States as a whole certainly gives us some clue as to why the Republicans won so handsomely in 1980. When the striking incompetence and lack of substantive purpose that Jimmy Carter displayed in office are factored into the explanation, the clues to the 1980 outcome multiply. But none of this, by itself, sheds adequate light upon the subsequent, dramatic political change in Washington that the Right has so far been able to carry out.

It may help to begin with an observation that is pretty obvious: the primary agenda of the 1980 election was the revitalization of American capitalism, the empire, and social mores. The Right was the revitalization movement. Ronald Reagan was (and is) its ideal spokesman. But should it prevail so readily in the “jungle politics” of Washington?

In answering this question, it seems necessary to return to a theme mentioned earlier. There is no organized, much less coherent, Left in the United States. The absence of socialism, social democracy, or even laborism as a major force in the American electoral market is one of the most important differences between it and those of other advanced industrial-capitalist societies. The failure of such an alternative to develop is squarely rooted in age-old fundamentals of American political culture—reinforced no doubt by the actions of men at crucial stages in our modern political history. As Louis Hartz pointed out a quarter-century ago, organizable political consciousness in the United States is dominated by a single liberal-individualist tradition, whose basic constituent elements were laid down by the English political theorist John Locke. Its four premises are private prop-

erty, civil and political liberty, liberal democracy, and religion (including both denominational and civic religion).

The implications of this state of affairs for the organization and integrity of American political coalitions are very great, especially as we move into an era of low-to-zero growth. Perhaps oversimplifying somewhat, we may say that there are three broad responses by the state and by political-representation organizations to the contemporary situation. The first is socialism (or social democracy), predicated not merely on a "better deal" for those who do not own property, but on a vision of the realization of human potential for the greatest possible number of ordinary people. The second is "political capitalism," based upon rapid economic growth within an existing order of economy and society. "Ideology" should come to an end in such a system, because its leaders and intellectuals both preach and practice the doctrine of social harmony, and deny any theory which asserts an inevitable or irrepressible conflict among social classes. The third is neo-laissez-faire, predicated upon identification of the growth of the liberal-capitalist state and its functions as a primary cause of the problems of realization and reproduction in contemporary capitalism. As with socialism and in sharp distinction to political capitalism, right-wing thought and practice accepts the reality of major conflicts among classes over the social product, but provides its own characteristic justifications in terms of a general and national interest.

The acceleration of the imperial and economic crises during the late 1970s increased the strains on the support for and the coherence of political capitalism to a crushing degree. By the same token, it fused and crystallized the conservative opposition that had been in the wilderness for most of the preceding era. For the economic crisis made it clear that accumulation could no longer be allowed to take care of itself. If capitalism were to be preserved in this context, this required a fundamental shift of state policy strategies from promoting consumption to promoting accumulation. But this meant reversing the historical direction of public policy over the past half-century generally, and over the past two decades in particular. By 1980, a compelling *collective agenda* requiring the active use of the state had come into being for the first time since the Great Depression —this time, naturally, on the Right. After so many years in which political capitalism had been in control of the intellectual and policy landscape, the groundwork had at last been laid for a sudden and devastatingly effective reversal.

We are now close to the end of our argument. The Democratic party and its liberal-interventionist intellectuals were subject to increasing incoherence as the fundamental issues of capitalist political economy became redefined, and as America increasingly lost control over its international environment. The syndicalist payoffs that were necessary to preserve the theory of social harmony under an ever-growing capitalist affluence became less viable. The proliferation of claimant groups, denying general effectiveness or legitimacy to this decompos-

ing coalition, further compromised the party's effectiveness. Perhaps such effectiveness could have been recovered had the Democratic party abandoned its doctrines of social harmony under capitalism and shifted to the left. But its leadership remains committed—in its own way every bit as much as Republicans—to middle-class perspectives and the great American propertarian political tradition. The price to be paid includes a systematic growth of the “party of nonvoters” as the Democratic (but *not* the Republican) fraction of the total potential electorate continues to decline. It also includes the incoherence and disarray that now plague the party.

By precisely the same token, the economic crisis has revitalized older private-enterprise perspectives on state policy, and the Republican party. What unites Republicans is their belief that the way back to the “American dream” lies through a fundamental shift from domestic social consumption to the promotion of capitalist accumulation and military consumption. With socialism an excluded alternative, and with political capitalism reaching a conspicuously degenerate condition during the Carter administration, the public's landslide vote of no confidence in 1980 necessarily elevated true believers in the capitalist gospel to power. The ultimate truth of the matter seems to be that you cannot get there from here in American politics if the direction is leftward, since the basis for a collective energizing left consciousness and will does not exist in this country. But you can if you are headed to the right, at least when the established order is in crisis and when there is wide agreement that it needs not replacement, but revitalization.

The political weather forecast for the 1980s is simple: extremely stormy. The policies of the Reagan administration are very straightforward. They add up to drastic slashes in federal domestic spending and functions, huge increases in military and other imperial spending, and massive tax cuts and loopholes designed to favor big business and wealthy individuals. Their purpose is to trigger a dramatic and rapid shift from mass consumption to elite capital accumulation. Inevitably, these policies entail what amounts to a one-sided declaration of class war on most of the American people. This point is very likely to become inescapably obvious in the years ahead, and bitter social conflicts seem almost certain to be only a matter of time. Can one cut taxes for the rich, drastically increase imperial expenditures and balance the budget at the same time? There is probably no reputable economist in the United States who thinks so, unless at the very least the rise in imperial spending is equalled by cuts in all other expenditures. With budget deficits of more than \$100 billion in each of the next several years, the stage is set not only for a renewed class war but for a kind of budgetary “doomsday machine” that makes a major economic catastrophe seriously possible for

the first time in fifty years.

The radical right now in power is doing its best, as usual, to prove that Marx lives. Even in America, they may be carrying out a counterrevolution with much too narrow a popular base for long-term viability. If so, we may be very close to an important moment of truth. For no one can pretend that the problems of American capitalism do not exist, or that the industrial base of the economy will recover its former robustness within the foreseeable future. Rejection of an intolerably unfair Reaganite "solution" to these problems, if it occurs, will certainly not mean that political capitalism can be restored either. Somehow, one finds it hard to imagine that electing Walter F. Mondale in 1984 will solve anything of fundamental importance. And what is one to make of a Democratic party—the self-described "party of the people"—whose congressional leadership in 1981 tries its best to outbid the Reaganites themselves in "tax-expenditure" concessions to favored business elites? What is one to make of a Democratic congressional leadership that makes a \$400 million present to a few thousand commodity traders in Chicago by rewriting the tax codes to permit them to claim their straddles? Is it any wonder that such a party should be losing so much of its mass support to the "party of nonvoters"?

Essentially, the situation is this. Political capitalism has achieved bankruptcy. There are important reasons for this, and the return of the Democrats to power (if it occurs) will change few of them. If the accumulation strategies of the far Right also fail—a prospective which looks increasingly likely—then what else is left? Very probably, one of two things: a first-rate political breakdown and regime crisis possibly requiring some form of dictatorship to cope with the debacle, or the rise of a socialist political movement on the ruins of—and extending far beyond—the Democratic party. The breakdown we shall very probably have anyway before this decade is out. The crucial question is what arises from it. Ronald Reagan is doing his best to teach the mass of ordinary Americans that politics matters greatly to their daily lives. As this painful lesson is learned, these ordinary Americans will seek or themselves produce a political leadership that actually speaks for them. We all know the reasons why the development of a genuine social-democratic movement in America is impossible. It is time to state clearly that it is also necessary.