
EDITORIAL

That the system of political parties is in an advanced state of decomposition is hardly news, but what it means for citizens goes to the very heart of the political situation. It represents the collapse of the last and possibly the most important democratic myth.

For more than a century political parties have been praised as the most democratic of our political institutions, the crucial medium for expressing the wishes of the citizen-voter, and the real instrument for mobilizing popular power to overcome the antidemocratic biases of the original Constitution. According to the myth, the parties would mobilize an otherwise inchoate citizenry into an electorate and organize it around candidates pledged to carry out party programs. In this way the issues would be focused and the voters educated. Competition between the parties would not only insure a choice but produce a critical opposing force that would restrain the party in power.

As things have worked out, parties are simply a way of organizing a contest for legitimacy that enables dominant corporate interests to purchase the requisite supply of authoritative euphemisms for advancing their specific purposes. The contest has to be run so that an illusion of popular participation and representation is maintained.

The party is only the latest of American political institutions to have reneged on its democratic promise. The Congress, presidency, civil service, and armed forces have been similarly transformed from institutions with some democratic potential, though surrounded by a larger element of democratic hokum, into institutions that are antidemocratic in their operation and authoritarian in their potentiality.

Congress, which was designed to represent the sovereign people and express the national will, has been fragmented, rendered at once impotent as a vehicle of popular sovereignty and vulnerable to corporate power.

The modern president, whose power was supposed to be derived from his unique status as the sole official elected by all the people, has become a prisoner of a network of interlocking directorates, public and private, and of an electoral process that has evolved into a quadrennial spectacle for the voters and a rare investment opportunity for those wealthy enough to speculate in the most prized political commodity, legitimation.

The civil service, which was to embody the ideal of public vocation as well as an expertise recruited from all groups, classes, and regions, has become a bureaucracy, a fourth estate of the realm where upward-bound managers acquire experience and contacts that will smooth their passage through the revolving door that leads into the corporate world; where managers on loan from corporations, gain temporary access to the inner sanctum of decision making and shape "public" policy to the goals of their corporate employers before returning to the home office; and where annually a fresh reserve army of college graduates enlist, eager to become apprentices to power and unaware that their main accomplishment will have been to deprive their home places of badly needed energy, hope, and a critical edge.

The armed forces, conceived originally as a tiny nucleus of professionals that would be supplemented during national emergencies by a citizen army, has become a huge permanent establishment, a cheap labor force mobilized to promote the expansion of capital markets and discourage popular revolutions, with the extra dividend of staving off social unrest at home by furnishing employment for poor whites and blacks.

These developments reveal the true location of radicalism in our time. Most revolutionaries (Marx himself excepted) and conservatives have conceived an image of radicalism that has, in fact, reversed the true order of things. Radicalism has been pictured as a protest movement coming from outside an established system; the system itself was pictured as "functioning," that is, more or less schlep-ping along in its routines. The system might be described as doing well or badly, or even in crisis, but not as "radical," considering that it was based on capitalism, with its deep desire for stability and settled expectations. All of this has been reversed as the power-dynamic of capitalism has developed and as ruling groups have come to understand that if the capacities of the system are to be utilized efficiently and exploited to their fullest, social conditions and human beings have to be constantly adapted. Capitalism is revolutionizing, not just of technology, but of society generally.

Politically this meant that if there was to be effective control over the accumulation and allocation of resources, human and natural, radical changes had to be introduced so that the state—and through its coercive authority the citizens—would keep pace with the innovative economy.

As perceived by the ruling groups the political regime of the future will be

technocratic, managerial, and objective. At its center will be a paradox: while there will be an intense struggle for power among national elites at the global and even interstellar domain and between regional or sectoral elites within the same society, domestic politics will have been eliminated or drastically reduced. Politics will consist of a choice between, reading from left to right, Felix Rohatyn and George P. Schultz.

A recent report on *The Future of American Political Parties* affords an amazing glimpse into the thinking of the technicians of power and the kinds of conditions they consider necessary to facilitate the power of the system.¹ They show us an antidemocratic future in which political parties will have only the most tenuous relationship with the citizenry and politics will have been rendered archaic. The report was entirely the work of the kind of selected group that operates as the higher civil service of corporational society: politicians and party professionals from both parties, some local officials, political consultants, and academic political scientists. The spectacle of representatives from the two parties convening in an atmosphere of camaraderie for the purpose of defining the future—not of the party *system*, which institutionalizes opposition, but of “parties”—could only happen in a society whose leading groups are traumatized by the fear of sharp, principled disagreement based on real social alignments.

Accordingly, the report presupposes a conception of party rivalry closer to the National Football League than to two organizations, with significantly different visions of society, contesting for the authority to govern. Ignoring totally the mood of disillusionment, bitterness, and unconfidence in the country, the report writes glowingly of the consensus among the technicians:

There appears to be a growing optimism emerging among professional politicians, party activists, the press, and academic experts on politics. There has been a spirit of rapprochement within each party, and between the two major parties as old divisions are being replaced by shared objectives and many believe the parties are developing new strengths to respond to a new political environment.

With an eerie obliviousness to implications, the report associates the new consensus concerning the purposes of political parties not with any urgent need to make them more effective vehicles of popular needs, but with more effective service to the state, that is, to the entity that by its command nature is inherently

¹ *The Future of American Political Parties*, Final Report of the Sixty-second American Assembly, Columbia University, April 1982.

antidemocratic. To perform this function, parties will have to be antipolitical. The report states this more obliquely: parties should promote "effective governance" and dampen social conflict, or "mediate differences" by unifying "us" when "we" are "divided by heated controversy." Parties will apparently have nothing to do with forging clear alternatives. Theirs is to be a pacifying function that "transforms (the) accommodations"—of what is not clear—"into recognizable, if not always purposeful direction."

The main task of parties henceforth will be to select candidates. "Even when we cannot agree on a unified party program for policy, we can and do agree on a party nominee. The nomination of candidates . . . is the rock bottom, minimally essential function of political party. . . ." The nomination of candidates is what parties have always done, but what makes this formula dangerous is that it is offered in a context where other properties of parties have been discarded. In this new depoliticized context, where candidates and parties both are dissociated from programs, ideals, and ideologies, "candidates" is a code word for "leadership."

The antipolitical and antidemocratic future of parties is most clearly outlined when the report identifies the new sources of party revival. Ignoring any notion that political renewal is to be sought among the great and troubling concerns of our time, the report looks for political revival in "the promise of technology." Cable television offers "an extraordinary opportunity to regain our sense of community and . . . restructure our political parties from the grass roots to the White House." The report hastily disclaims any intention of using the magic of telecommunications to promote "instant democracy." Rather it is to help party leaders communicate with "party officials and workers" throughout the country. The report also notes approvingly the success of "direct mail technology" in creating a vast "network" of small contributors or "party activists," but this is accompanied by a warning not to allow hyped-up appeals to create "even more ideologically polarized political parties."

The report takes an openly hostile view of recent reforms that attempted to broaden participation in party processes. The "tide" of participation, the report roundly declares, "should be stemmed." Then, as though to underscore its contempt for democratic considerations, it recommends the lifting of restrictions on campaign funds. Thus while the parties of the future must be protected against an excess of democracy, there can never be too much money. "We reject the notion that our political process involves too much money. The problem of money in the system is one of scarcity for parties and candidates rather than excess." Appropriately, the report is so confident about the indifference of the citizens that it recommends a bald power-grab by the parties. Legislation should be passed that will "redesign" the rules "so as to shift as much political power back into the political parties as the public is willing to permit." This program, which calls for

the virtual elimination of all but the most formal links of party to democracy, is enthusiastically endorsed as "the single most important step we could take in attaining a healthier stronger state."

Once it is understood that this kind of radicalism is inherent in the system, then it is evident that it cannot be countered by a politics that schemes to exploit that same system for the benefit of the victims. A new radicalism is needed. Its first order of business is not to preserve continuities or to figure out how these can be turned to favor the good old cause of liberal-social-democratic planning, but to identify the points of discontinuity that matter in the building of new political and social relationships and, ultimately, new political persons. The discontinuities must be ones that signify new life forms, not just new policies that perpetuate the old depoliticizing tendencies of centralization, bureaucratic paternalism, and civic passivity. These discontinuities already exist in the (literally) thousands of spontaneous and self-generated efforts of citizens all over the country to pool resources and skills in order to fulfill needs that they themselves have identified and defined. The promise of relationships that are nonhierarchical and noncoercive; that seek to integrate expert knowledge rather than to submit to it; that are solicitous of place, whether urban or rural, rather than exploitive of it; and that proceed by common deliberation rather than looking to leadership to relieve people of the burden of choice, is a radical promise that holds out the hope of undermining the authoritarianism implicit in the emerging technocratic order.

—Sheldon S. Wolin
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