A Crisis of Representation

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What happened in the US elections does not represent a constitutional crisis. Neo-liberalism's chickens have come home to roost, and the crisis we are experiencing is what Gramsci in the '20s called a "crisis of representation," one in which the links between parties and their putative constituencies break down. Whether there is a larger "crisis of hegemony" lurking as well, one in which state institutions no longer accomplish core functions, remains to be seen. The latter could in turn precipitate a constitutional crisis.

The neo-liberal, "third-way" policies that turned the Clinton Democratic Party into an engine of growing inequality presented a bill that came due yesterday. The Democratic Party came to resemble the Republican Party c.1960: a coalition of big money, Hollywood, suburbanites focused on personal freedoms, and a plantation-like relationship to ethnic, especially Black, politicians. Obama, with his promises of "hope" and "change," appealing personal history, and opposition to excessive warfare could make this work. But inequality has only become worse as the economic situation has improved since 2008, and Clinton lacked all charm as well as any social program. She also insisted on displaying an itchy trigger finger at a time when sending working class children off to desert wars had lost all its glamor. As a result, her neo-liberal party proved highly vulnerable to the Nationalist Party assembled by Donald Trump. And she became a victim of a certain misogyny as well.

Trump was elected by an angry and disheartened majority and not, as much of the liberal media would like to have it, by a racist minority and yahoo blue-collar losers. He was elected in the same country and to a considerable extent by the same electorate that voted twice for an African American president in large numbers. Pollsters and pundits could not see the extent of anger and frustration in the US and beyond. From within the system it is hard to see that this anger is not just understandable but also justified. This is why Clinton's counter to Trump's "Make America Great Again" was a total flop: "America *Is* Great" is not very sympathetic to the 99%. As Piketty and Streeck have shown, the disparity between the top 1 percent and the rest is near a modern high. Trump voters were not wrong to think that the system is working against them.

Having moved heaven and earth to derail the Sanders effort to shift the debate from culture war to class war, the neo-liberal Democrats had nowhere to go. All Sanders really sought to do was establish an updated New Deal coalition, but this was too threatening to the Democratic Establishment. When you block the possibility for change from the Left, nationalism and racism will fill the space, and change will come from the Right. That was Trump.

Hillary Clinton was correctly perceived as exactly what they are sick of and sick from: a dismantled social state, status quo cronyism, more wars fought by the children of the working class, the entanglement of money and government, a globalization from NAFTA to TTIP that hurts the middle class and those who are economically weakened, a framework of sympathy that is more concerned with endangered species than with endangered jobs, and the suburban social liberals' abandonment of the material interests of their erstwhile working class allies in favor of lifestyle libertarianism.

The failure to offer a serious alternative to the current maladies of capitalism should not be construed as a constitutional crisis. That those who come to power as a result of such a failure have a lesser regard for the constitution is, however, worrisome enough.

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