The Contemporary Crisis of the American Ideology

written by Dan La Botz | June 25, 2016

Surveying the political scene in America, we are now witnessing the shattering of the last remnants of the American ideology that has maintained itself—despite strains—for almost 70 years. The ideas that justified the American economic and political system in the minds of most of our citizens throughout that long period came under stress during earlier storms—from the 1950s to the 1970s in particular—and a few beams and joists cracked but did not give way. Today the manifold crises of capitalism mean that the entire existing intellectual structure of American capitalism is breaking up. And because of the role that the U.S. capitalist class plays in the world, this represents a crisis of world capitalist leadership and legitimacy. The question then arises: What will the country's rulers attempt to put in its place, and what alternative explanation will we on the left and in the labor movement be able to offer to the country's workers?

After World War II, Republicans warily accepted Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal as the basis for the American economy—once the conservative Taft-Hartley labor law was passed—and the two parties united around a bipartisan foreign policy aimed at containing Communism. American hegemony in the capitalist world, based on the destruction of Europe and Japan and the dangerous balance of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, made possible both a Pax Americana and economic prosperity in the United States. At the same time, the American elite, the establishment that ruled and reasoned on behalf of the capitalist class, promoted a new explanation and rationale for the structure of American society. American politicians and government officials, the media and the churches, schools and universities, beginning in the late 1940s and continuing through the 1960s, created and propagated a set of interlocking and mutually reinforcing explanations, an ideological structure that came to be accepted by most Americans most of the time. These ideas—fundamentally different from the Gilded Age ideology of 1870-1900 or the Progressive Era ideology that was dominant roughly 1900-1941—constituted a genuine worldview.

The American ruling class constructed a set of ideas that not only justified its economic and political domination but one that also encompassed virtually every aspect of life, from the boardroom to the bedroom, from the factory floor to the football field, from the house of prayer to the counting house. American capitalists believed themselves not only to be justified in ruling the United States but also vindicated in their attempts to impose their model of capitalism together with its particular conception of democracy upon the entire world. America, they argued, with its unlimited natural resources, its free enterprise system, its profusion of products and the high standard of living they provided, its equal opportunity and religious toleration, its slow but steady progress toward full racial integration, and its opposition to totalitarianism, was the model not only for North America, but for everywhere.

While “the ruling ideas of every period are the ideas of the ruling class,” as Marx once wrote, the rulers’ ideas do not sit lightly and comfortably on every social group and certainly not on every individual. After all, all the civilizations we know have been class societies based on oppression and exploitation, producing resistance and sometimes rebellion. Every society even in the most stable times has its dissidents. However, what makes an ideology successful is its ability to dominate the intellectual, cultural, and moral universe of a society for most people most of the time. That was certainly true of the post-World War II American ideology until finally, in the 2000s, when a host of economic and social forces blew the ideological framework apart. Once, the American elite’s worldview held everything together. Today, ideas, facts, and opinions—ripped from their ideological mooring—blow through the social media and the popular consciousness like the debris scattered by a hurricane.

The 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign has not been responsible for shattering the old American ideology; that process began years before and peaked more recently with the Occupy Wall Street movement and then Black Lives Matter. Sanders took up the issues of those movements and honed them into a powerful message about the role of money in politics, the growth of economic inequality, the need for racial justice, and even ending a foreign policy based on “regime change.” By taking the criticism of the status quo to the level of national presidential politics, Sanders’ campaign shone klieg lights on the class character of our government and the inequalities in our society. By that light we see the wreckage not only of an ideology but of a social order.

The Postwar American Ideology

What was the American ideology that first emerged in the postwar period as a result of the country’s victory in World War II and its domination of the world economy? What was the worldview of the capitalist class and its constellation of political and intellectual associates? How did American capitalists and their political representatives see the world, and how did they explain it to others? These were the axioms of their ideology.

A Middle-class Society: America has achieved social harmony within a relatively egalitarian society in which distinct social classes no longer exist and therefore class struggle has also disappeared. This was made possible by social mobility based in part on individual initiative and in part on meritocracy that enabled an individual to move from one social layer to another (as defined by education and income—not production relations). In America everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed—and most do. (See for example Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology,* 1960, for a summary of this view.)

A Pluralist Democracy: America represents a middle way in the philosophy of government between the dangerous extremes of Communism and Fascism. American government is fundamentally democratic in character, not only because it is a representative republic, but also because of capitalist competition tempered by government regulation. The two-party system, organized respectively around conservative and liberal ideals, serves to incorporate all citizens in a uniquely stable political arrangement. Above all, however, America is democratic because it is subject to pressure groups of all sorts, from business and labor to farmers and homeowners. (See for example Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory,* 1965.)

An Economic Model of Prosperity: America’s corporations produce a consumer society that makes life better for all. American corporations, collaborating with the labor unions that represent about a third of our country’s workers, provide long-term stable jobs, decent wages, and benefits such as health insurance and pensions, contributing to a high standard of living that improves with every generation. To protect Americans from monopolies that might cause economic harm, the government regulates utilities such as electric power, gas, and telephones, but otherwise the market

prevails. Since markets don't always work perfectly, following John Maynard Keynes, the government intervenes to help the unemployed, the poor, and the elderly. (See for example Paul Samuelson, *Economics,* 1948.)

A Social and Racial Democracy: In America, all immigrant groups are gradually assimilated and find security and opportunity. Negroes, Latins, and Orientals in the North and West might encounter difficulties, but they too will eventually find a place in America through modest government encouragement and their own initiative. If there is poverty and crime in the Negro and Latin ghettos, it is because of economic and social problems that can and will be ameliorated. The South represents a distinct region with its own history and customs, but it will be gradually reformed and become part of the American mainstream.

A Judeo-Christian Society: America is a nation based on Judeo-Christian values. While Protestants founded this country, religious toleration made it possible for Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Jews to participate in all of the country's economic, social, and political institutions. The American economic and political elite will be strengthened by the inclusion of these other groups, and the rest of the society will also be enhanced by their incorporation. (See for example E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America,* 1964.)

Equality and Fulfillment for Women: Women in America enjoy full equality—not only the right to vote, but also the right to work in virtually any and every field. Many more women and girls now seek higher education and work in the professions. Even women who work find fulfillment as housewives and mothers, as leaders of the Parent Teacher Association, Girl Scouts, and other organizations in their communities. Women today, relieved of many of their domestic chores by such labor saving devices as washing machines, have freer and fuller lives than ever.

Individual Self-realization: Through a combination of faith, psychological counseling, and if necessary medication, all Americans can become well adjusted, finding not only contentment but self-realization. The new psychologists approach the patient without prejudice, offering their unconditional respect for each individual so that he or she can find their own solutions to life's challenges. American society not only offers a higher standard of living but also personal fulfillment. (See for example Carl Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy*, 1951.)

Inexhaustible Natural Resources: America is a land blessed with inexhaustible natural resources of every sort, from rich soil and great forests to coal and iron and gas and oil. Modern science, particularly chemistry, has provided herbicides and pesticides that have made possible an agricultural revolution. We now provide food not only for America but for the entire world. While corporations exploit our natural resources for the benefit of all, our country also wisely sets aside land as nature preserves in national parks in the mountains and along the seashore to protect wilderness and wildlife.

American Exceptionalism: Our nation is exceptional: a city on a hill, an example to the world. Americans, thanks to our democracy and prosperity, are a superior people: better fed, housed, and clothed, better educated, and better paid. Our people embody in their lives as business people, professionals, and as working people the American ideals of democracy and free enterprise. Our history, our culture, and economic and political system allow us as a nation to play a leading role in our hemisphere and in the world at large, helping through our example, through foreign aid, through diplomacy, and when necessary through military intervention to move the world forward toward peace and prosperity.

A Benevolent World Power: On the world stage the American government, working with its NATO allies as well as with the bloc of democracies in the United Nations, is a benevolent force, dedicated

to world peace, economic development and prosperity for all, and democracy throughout the globe. Communism threatens world peace and prosperity and must be contained and deterred. Over time America's democracy and its higher standard of living will vanquish Russian and Chinese Communism, and those countries will join the free world.

As one can see, there is an architecture here; the ten different beams and joists of this structure fit together forming a unified whole that explains virtually every aspect of American life. The ideas of economic prosperity and equality of opportunity provide the foundation.

The ideology described in this piece—propagated through schools, churches, ethnic organizations, and government at all levels—was largely the creation of Democratic Party-aligned liberal intellectuals. The Democrats largely created the American postwar political economic regime. Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower left the New Deal structures in place and thereby institutionalized the American postwar order. The Democrats—who had led the nation during World War II—also endorsed the Korean War and led the Vietnam War, playing the leading role in creating the nation's imperial foreign policy.

Liberals provided the strongest justifications for the Cold War and the anti-Communist crusade: the defense of democracy. Historians Henry Steele Commager, author of textbooks such as *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (1977), and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., the biographer of Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and both John F. and Robert Kennedy, represent the archetypal liberal intellectual who justified both the imperial foreign policy and America's social welfare system, so limited in comparison to the entitlements in the Western European social democracies and the Communist bloc.

The majority of Americans, especially in the prosperous period of 1945-1960, the era of the G.I. Bill and the Veterans Housing Administration, strongly embraced these ideas and used them to understand the world and their place in it. America's dominant place in the world capitalist system, its prosperous national economy, and its strong state and domestic social programs meant that most people could see themselves in and through this world view as it came to them daily in the newspaper, over the radio or TV, in church or temple, or in public schools as well as colleges and universities.

Still, a number of developments—the failure of the South to modernize and democratize, the expansion of mass higher education, the development of the counterculture, the sexual revolution, the war in Vietnam, repeated economic recessions, the development of economic competition with Europe and Japan—like so many quakes and tremors would shake the intellectual edifice that had been built.

The Postwar Worldview
Put Under Stress

It is clear that some of these explanations of American society were weaker than others, most obviously the point dealing with racial equality. Black people clearly were not full citizens anywhere in America, and they did not enjoy equal opportunity economically or socially, as Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), an indictment of America's racial policies, had documented so thoroughly. So it is not surprising that it was that weak beam that first gave way with the rise of the civil rights movement of 1956-1965. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the movement he led, and his book *Why We Can't Wait* (1963) challenged the myth of racial equality. And that beam in the intellectual superstructure broke.

Still, the structure did not collapse—even after the civil rights movement became "Black power" and

ghetto rebellions, often in the form of riots and arson, swept the country, while Malcolm X's speeches slashed at the remainder of the doctrine of racial equality. The passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts; the corporations' opening up of skilled, white collar, and managerial positions to Blacks; and greatly expanded social welfare programs calmed the Black rebellion. The elite's intellectual carpenters spliced onto the old beam a new one: With civil rights laws and social legislation, it was now claimed, Blacks had achieved equality in America. The society, it was declared, was colorblind. The ideological structure had trembled and creaked, but it did not fall.

The U.S. war against Vietnam (1955-1975) tested and nearly demolished another of the principal elements of the American ideology—that the United States was a benevolent world power. The Vietnamese people's struggle for their independence and self-determination, combined with huge anti-war demonstrations in the United States and around the world, damaged confidence in America's benevolence and good will both abroad and at home. The Students for a Democratic Society's *Port Huron Statement,* projecting the unity of the civil rights, student, and peace movements, continued the pressure on the concept of racial equality and also challenged the notion of America as a benevolent world power.

After the death of 58,000 Americans and between two and three million Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians, the United States finally lost the war. After that it proved impossible for the ruling elite to reconstruct the foreign policy element of the American ideology. Some liberals drew the conclusion that there should be no more large-scale foreign wars, while some conservatives drew the conclusion that there should be no more limited wars. The American elite, while in the broad sense still committed to the bipartisan foreign policy of defending U.S. corporate interests around the world, no longer had a common notion of how to do so. One pillar of the ideological construct seemed practically irreparable; and that weak beam meant the entire structure became far less stable.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which signaled the start of the mass women's movement in America, took an ax to another of the central ideological columns of the postwar ideology. Women in America, she argued, were not happy and were not fulfilled in their supposed roles as sometime workers and full-time wives and mothers. Friedan went on to launch the National Organization for Women, while other women created thousands of consciousness-raising groups in communities across the country. The women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s then demanded genuine equality in every aspect of women's lives, from education and sports to employment and political representation. The Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion represented one of the most significant victories, both a practical and symbolic achievement of the women's movement: control of their own bodies.

Once again, however, the establishment's intellectuals spliced on to the old beam a new one arguing that with the many federal and state laws regarding women—even without the Equal Rights Amendment that died in 1982—women had finally achieved full equality. Year after year, however, statistics showed that women, particularly working-class and poor women, had not achieved parity in virtually any area of American life, and so that beam too creaked when trod upon.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), an attack on the indiscriminate use of pesticides and the chemical companies that produced them, suggested for the first time to a broad public audience the notion that U.S. corporations and the government might be endangering the environment. Barry Commoner's *Science and Survival* (1966), examining the impact of science and technology on the environment, and especially his *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (1971), warning of the need to change the country's and world's policies and behavior, offered a profound ecosocialist critique of the old notion of unlimited resources. E.F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), coinciding as its publication did with the country's petroleum energy crisis and arguing as it did that

our economy was unsustainable, turned many into environmentalists. By the time of the first Earth Day in 1970, many Americans had come to doubt that the country had unlimited natural resources or that those resources were being conserved. The new environmental movement set thousands in motion and millions began to question the entire economic system, and President Richard Nixon responded in 1970 by creating the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Again important political reforms repaired some of the damage to the ideological structure, even if they did not provide anything like adequate protection to the environment.

Democratic Party liberals, who held power through much of the 1960s and 1970s, responded to the challenges of the era if only in an attempt to shore up the system. Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969) expanded the role of the federal government in a manner not seen since the 1930s. Johnson not only oversaw the passage of the Civil Rights, Voting Rights, and the Economic Opportunity acts, but he also pushed through Congress his War on Poverty programs: Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start early education, and the Model Cities urban renewal and housing programs. Nixon too expanded the government's role, not only by creating the EPA but also by establishing the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Nevertheless, the Vietnam War, combined with the Black urban rebellions at home, frustrated Johnson's attempt to resolve the political conflicts that tore at America's ideological system. The country's elite could not simultaneously manage America's world empire and control its restive Black population without tearing apart the intellectual justifications for American liberal-democratic capitalism. Millions ceased to believe in the dominant ideology during those years.

And then capitalism went into crisis. The resurgence of Germany and Japan—their capitalist industries rebuilt after World War II with the most modern technology—created stiff competition for the U.S. in the domestic and world markets by the late 1960s. Within a decade American corporations were closing older steel mills and auto plants, laying off hundreds of thousands. OPEC raised gasoline prices. The economic crises of 1974-1975 and 1979-1981, occurring in times of inflation while leading to official unemployment rates of 10 percent, challenged the fundamental notion that the American economy could deliver prosperity to the majority of its people. Profit rates fell and employers went on the offensive; the postwar social pact ended. Class struggle resumed—but it was largely a one-sided fight, as employers attacked, unions retreated, and workers lost ground. There were no repairs to that part of the ideological structure; like a bad landlord, the ruling class ideologues simply ignored the fact that the ceiling was falling.

The Conservative Attempt at Ideological Reconstruction

The social crises and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and then the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s had made it clear that the postwar ideological structure—even with the repairs and renovations that had been made—was failing. The ruling class's lack of a coherent ideological explanation for the various crises taking place in the society itself became a cause of further stress, as the elites recognized. The gods seemed to be failing and the catechism no longer seemed to explain the world.

A group of right-wing ideologues and politicians—first presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, then presidential aide and speech writer (and later presidential candidate) Patrick Buchanan, the Rev. Jerry Falwell, and a number of others—recognizing the opportunity to create a new ideological framework, attempted to construct an alternative worldview organized around a different set of propositions derived from conservative economic and religious principles. Unlike earlier groups that had sought to refurbish the post-war intellectual edifice, this group wanted to demolish it. They took as their model something resembling nineteenth-century notions of laissez-faire capitalism and combined them with fundamentalist Christianity and a mythical and idyllic vision of an early twentieth-century America of family farmers, small businesses, and pious congregations living in

blissful harmony. This remains one of the two or three principal conservative visions even today.

With the fall of Communism, some conservative intellectuals attempted to create a new version of Daniel Bell's *The End of Ideology*. In his 1989 essay "The End of History," Francis Fukayama wrote, "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." All would now discover that liberal-democratic capitalism was the best system. A series of wars, economic crises, and domestic conflicts called that conclusion into question within a few years.

The New Right's notions, as they developed into an ideology and a political program, meant reversing not only the gains of the Black and women's movements, but also attacking labor unions and dismantling social programs. Ronald Reagan attempted these during his presidency (1981-1989), and had some successes, most notably his destruction of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers union in 1981, which initiated a wave of government and private employer union busting. But dismantling the New Deal and War on Poverty programs proved more difficult than Reagan had imagined, while his military programs were essentially Keynesian. His rhetorical offensive against liberalism and big government only put more stress on the postwar ideology, especially as it came into conflict with his actual practice of expanded military budgets and a growing national debt, though the American economic and social system remained, with some regressive alterations, fundamentally as it had been since 1948.

Reagan's successor, former CIA Director George H.W. Bush, took office in 1989 and plunged into the Gulf War (or First Iraq War) just one year later. Provoked by former U.S. ally Saddam Hussein's defiant invasion of Kuwait, it was the largest U.S. military intervention since Vietnam; the entire war, from preparations to U.S. victory, lasted just one year. The Gulf War would prove to be the first step into what would be a series of disastrous wars and military actions in the 2000s against Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Middle Eastern, African, and South Asian nations. At the same time the American economy faltered. Bush had inherited a tremendous budget deficit from Reagan, forcing him to work with Democrats to raise taxes. The economy went into recession with unemployment reaching 7.8 percent, the highest since 1984, just on the eve of the election in 1992, dooming the first Bush presidency to just one term. Disappointed in the Republicans, America turned back to the Democrats.

Into the Neoliberal Era of Austerity

President Bill Clinton, while espousing the Democrats' historic liberal rhetoric, undertook to strengthen the financial sector and expand corporate power and began to roll back the social welfare system while intensifying repression of the lower classes. In what was in fact a period of renewed economic expansion, and even very modest wage gains, the United States entered the age of austerity. Clinton took up the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996—which had been a central element of the Republicans' "Contract with America"—saw it through an obliging Congress, and signed it. Hundreds of thousands of mostly women and children lost their welfare benefits. Clinton also supported and signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, a huge and complicated law that provided billions in funding for police, 100,000 new officers, and vastly increased incarceration that fell disproportionately on Blacks and Latinos.

One of the most important acts of the Clinton administration was the final negotiation, passage, and signature of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which had been initiated by Bush and which facilitated the movement of capital and goods between Canada, Mexico, and the United

States, though workers could not move freely. While in many ways a ratification of long-term trends toward the integration of the North American economies, it formalized and institutionalized the domination of the great corporations on the continent, giving them access to the capital, land, and natural resources of all three countries, while taking advantage in particular of the cheap labor of Mexico. Labor unions and environmental organizations fought for "side agreements," but they had little impact on future developments. Unions continued to shrink in size, lose their economic power, and decline in political influence.

NAFTA's enactment signaled America's entry into the age of globalization and neoliberalism. The old social pact and ideological paradigm had never bargained for a common market of North America, nor had it contemplated the world production of automobiles in several nations. When the World Trade Organization (WTO) met in Seattle in 1999 with a proposal on the agenda to admit China—a country where there were no workers' rights and virtually no environmental regulations—environmentalists and labor union activists joined together and with demonstrations of 40,000 people paralyzed the city's streets. While that WTO meeting was a failure, China was admitted two years later. American foreign trade would expand exponentially after NAFTA and the WTO's expansion to include China, but after the brief boom of the 1990s, there was no significant increase in workers' wages or the American standard of living.

A friend of Wall Street, Clinton signed the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act of 1998 that repealed two key provisions of the Glass-Steagall Act, thus granting greater latitude to financial institutions by permitting banks to affiliate with securities firms, changes that led to the growth of financial speculation and to the Great Recession of 2008. While Clinton's administration coincided with a period of economic expansion and rising profits, of greater employment opportunities and even briefly of higher wages, his policies accelerated the trends toward increased economic inequality and put unbearable weight on one of the key girders of the postwar ideology, namely that America was a classless society. The voters turned to the Republicans.

By the millennium, when President George W. Bush (2001-2009), son of the former president and himself former governor of Texas, became president, one could hear the postwar ideological structures groan and whine. Though Bush was a Republican and an ostensible conservative, he expanded government social programs more than any president since Johnson. As under Reagan, with both the military and domestic budgets expanding, the government plunged deeper into debt. All of that would put him at odds with right-wing, fiscally conservative Republicans. Bush, like his father, would probably only have served one term, but the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon turned him briefly into a national hero as he pledged that America would have revenge.

Bush had surrounded himself with a hawkish group known as the Vulcans—Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, secretaries of state Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage—who together used the 9/11 terrorist attack as the rationale for wars against the Taliban in Afghanistan and against Saddam Hussein in Iraq, despite no Afghan or Iraqi being implicated in the World Trade Center attack . The "Vulcans put forth a remarkable series of new doctrines and ideas, ones that represented a dramatic break with the foreign policies and strategies of the past" (James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans,* Viking, 2004, xii). These included an aggressive posture toward North Korea that went beyond containment and deterrence, a justification of "preemptive" attacks on other nations, as well as calls for regime change throughout the Middle East, often wrapped in the rhetoric of democracy; the fundamental notion was U.S. world military supremacy and domination.

The Vulcans and their views provided theoretical justification for Bush's war on Iraq, though it had

had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks, explained to the public by the outright lie that Saddam was a threat to America. Though Bush proclaimed victory over Iraq in his "Mission Accomplished" speech of 2003, the war continued into the 2010s, killing hundreds of thousands and virtually destroying the nation of Iraq. (In fact this disastrous war continues today, now having spread to Syria, taking tens of thousands more lives, displacing millions, and virtually destroying that nation too.) Neither the Iraq nor Afghanistan wars ever ended. To many it was now clear that far from being a beneficent power, the United States was engaged in permanent war around the world. Moreover, increasingly the United States was losing these wars or at least being stalemated.

Then, the disgrace of Hurricane Katrina. The shameful mishandling of response to the hurricane, in which 1,836 died and 705 went missing as the Bush administration bumbled, completely discredited his administration. The Wall Street economic crisis of 2008 utterly demolished what little remained of Bush's reputation. With the financial crisis—an economic storm of dimensions unseen since the 1930s—the superstructure of American ideology began to burst apart, though it would take eight more years and a presidential primary before we could understand all of the damage and what it meant for conceptions of American society both in the minds of the rulers and the ruled.

The Old Paradigm Collapses

While we did not necessarily recognize it at the time, the U.S. failure in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the 2008 economic crisis spelled the end of the dominant ideology. The old ideas no longer explained or justified things, and so they were accepted no longer. Yet the structure did not simply collapse but was held up by the desire of millions to continue to believe. The election of Barack Obama, America's first Black president, obscured at first just how much things had changed. Elected on the slogans of "Hope" and "Change," many expected Obama to deal boldly and forcefully with the Great Recession and end the U.S. involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Many said that the country needed a new FDR, someone who would rescue the financial system, save the failing corporations, create jobs, and lift up the poor. Someone who would save the country's working people—for that's how they understood Roosevelt's New Deal. Someone who would restore the social pact and restore to their place the nation's ideals as enshrined in the postwar ideology.

Obama couldn't, wouldn't, and didn't. His $787 billion stimulus program for infrastructure, health, and education proved to be inadequate to set the economy in motion—it would take years for the recession to end, and for many it never did. Unemployment rates remained high for years, as did home foreclosures and evictions. Nor did Obama push for labor law reform, for immigrant rights laws, or for the environmental legislation that he had promised. The president did work in 2010 to pass his Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act—dubbed Obamacare—a private insurance plan written by the insurance companies, the health and hospitals corporations, and the pharmaceutical industry, a vast and complicated law that would expand coverage for some, but in deference to the profit imperatives of the private insurance and drug companies, still left 30 million uninsured and millions underinsured and facing unrestrained increases in premiums and cutbacks in benefits.

The far-right Tea Party movement, an ersatz grassroots movement financed by the energy baron Koch brothers and other wealthy conservatives, took to the streets in protest against what they called the "socialist" Obamacare bill. A movement of mostly white, suburban, middle-class conservatives, it was the first major right-wing movement to take to the streets since the segregationists of the 1960s. And with its racist caricatures of Obama and its Aryan Nation and Nazi hangers' on, it resembled them. The Tea Party, taking up all of the right-wing causes from opposing abortion to opposing concealed-carry restrictions, soon became a political movement that elected more than 45 congressional representatives, not only making the Republicans the majority in the House but also moving the Republican Party further to the right. Tea Party legislators adopted the strategy of making the Republicans the "party of 'No!'" and working to paralyze government.

Ironically, it was the Tea Party with its claim that Obama was a socialist that—after decades of anti-Communism—unwittingly reintroduced and legitimated in American society a discussion of socialism.

Meanwhile, sentiment grew that presidents Bush and Obama had acted to save the banks but not the unemployed or those facing foreclosure. On September 11, 2011, protesters planted themselves in Zuccotti Park in the middle of New York's financial district under the banner "Occupy Wall Street." The occupiers called themselves the 99 percent as opposed to the 1 percent who owned the nation's wealth and dominated its political system. The occupation grew rapidly in New York and spread within a few weeks across the country as tens of thousands occupied public places, marched on banks and corporations, and demanded an end to the role of money in politics and to the tremendous economic inequality that had come to exist in America. The Obama administration discretely coordinated the suppression of the movement, working with the mostly Democratic mayors in cities across the country. There were many beatings, pepper sprayings, and some 7,361 arrests in 117 cities in the United States between September 2011 and July 2012, including some indictments for terrorism, and Occupy was crushed. Nevertheless, its impact on the country had been enormous, driving the Tea Party from center stage and making the issues of economic inequality and the role of money in politics the subject of a national discussion.

Obama's foreign policy proved to be equally unfortunate, and because the anti-war movement of the Bush years had collapsed upon Obama's election, there was very little organized opposition. While the United States reduced its troop commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama failed to extricate the country completely from the two wars. The challenge of the Arab Spring revealed that the United States—after initially supporting the repressive of regime of Mubarak in Egypt, then dallying with political democracy in one or two countries—preferred alliances with dictators to the risks of social upheaval that might lead to more independent or radical regimes. Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's program of regime change in Libya became a disaster, while in Egypt the United States supported the repression of the movement and endorsed General Sisi. In Syria, after a failed attempt to oust President Bashar al-Assad, the Obama administration reversed itself and seemed to accept the notion of leaving him in power, with the rationale that this could end the incredibly destructive and disastrous war that Obama had helped to encourage. And every week the president sat down and put his initials on the drone kill list, sending missiles into Pakistan intended to assassinate terrorists but often taking the lives of innocents. For liberals, there was deep disappointment in Obama, who had seemed to promise so much and had delivered so little.

There was also a war at home. Police officers around the country shot Black men on a regular basis, hundreds of them each year. The shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014, was taken up as a cause by the Black Lives Matter movement. Within a month there were tens of thousands marching in protests from New York to Los Angeles. The demonstrators, though largely nonviolent, were militant; they blocked highways, disrupted public events, and challenged government officials and politicians. Like Occupy, Black Lives Matter represented a challenge to the entire economic and social system, a system to which racism was in fact integral. Occupy and Black Lives Matter, and the country's apparently permanent war footing, operated like so many wrecking balls on the old ideology. On the right, ideologues such as Senator Ted Cruz, a Republican presidential contender, attempted to lay the foundations for a new national ideology based on Christianity, the Constitution, and capitalism. On the left there was Bernie Sanders.

When the longtime independent and self-identified socialist Bernie Sanders entered the presidential primaries in April of 2015 he campaigned as a Democrat, but simultaneously his campaign seemed to challenge the Democratic Party and everything it stood for. Sanders criticized the party's leaders, its funding, its structures, and its policies. Not surprisingly, the Democratic National Committee worked to prevent him from accessing files, few if any prominent Democrats endorsed him, and no

Democratic Party fundraisers supported him, nor did the party's think-tanks. Sanders campaigned on the most progressive campaign platform seen in the Democratic Party in decades: ending economic inequality, getting corporate money out of politics, setting a $15 an hour national minimum wage, providing free college education, combatting climate change, fighting for racial justice, strengthening and expanding social security, defending and expanding women's and LBGT rights, and so on—it was as if someone had turned on the lights. To achieve this, Sanders called for a struggle against the "billionaire class" and for a "political revolution." Sanders' social democratic program lit up the American political scene, revealing by contrast the dark and dismal social and economic reality that had developed in recent decades of so much underemployment, low wages, and falling living standards. When Sanders' light came on we could see in striking chiaroscuro not only the struggles of the working class, the suffering of the poor, the selfishness of the rich, and the meanness of government, we could also see the wreckage of the once dominant American ideology.

The long overdue collapse of the postwar ideology will lead conservatives, liberals, and the left to propose alternatives, and it is important that we do. Socialism as Sanders defines it—social-democratic, universal entitlements—seems to many people to be the alternative. Their intuition is right; if limited, it is certainly a start.

A New National Ideology

Yet Sanders' platform by itself will not be enough. Sanders himself has admitted this, saying repeatedly in stump speeches that real change only comes from the bottom up. We are at a moment when it is possible to see a new, radically democratic ideology emerging from those involved in Occupy and Black Lives Matter and amongst Sanders' supporters. They want real democracy, not government by banks and corporations. They want a comprehensive national health care system and free public education. They want an end to racism and real economic and social equality for all. They want the government to take steps immediately to deal with the environmental crisis. All of this is excellent, yet it does not go far enough to create a new *socialist* movement. We will have to discuss and debate with the millions of newly politicized Sanders' supporters our notions of a more comprehensive and more profoundly democratic and socialist worldview.

What would such a socialist worldview and socialist program look like?

The Socialization of the Economy: The means of production and distribution must pass into the collective hands of the American people. Democratic planning, not market forces, must coordinate the moving parts of a complex modern economy. This would end the capitalist system and represent a revolutionary change, breaking the power of the capitalist class and taking a first step toward socialism.

A New Sort of Government: The American political system has a *capitalist* character and is far from truly democratic. While we have a liberal state and elected representatives, legislators should come not typically from the corporate-lawyer elite as most do today, but overwhelmingly from the working class—from among teachers and truck drivers, computer programmers and restaurant workers.

Democracy at Every Level: Even radical political democracy will be insufficient to create a classless society. Popular participation, community control, and workers' control in the workplace will be necessary to allow all Americans to have a voice and a vote in matters of concern to them.

Self-organization of the Oppressed: Socialism will only function when all groups in society, particularly groups that have historically suffered greater oppression and exploitation—Blacks, Latinos, women, LGBT people, the disabled—can organize independently and on their own behalf. Self-organization must be supported within the left itself, in social movements, labor unions, and political parties.

An Ecologically Sustainable Economy: All of these democratic principles will make it possible for people to work together to plan a new economy that will meet human needs in the broadest sense, to work not for warfare but for our common welfare, and to avoid ecological catastrophe. We must abandon the idea of constantly increased production, overwhelmingly based on carbon fuels, and create a new conception of a society that is rich not only because of the stuff it produces but because of the more fulfilling life it makes possible both for communities and individuals.

Social Solidarity: Such a society will be based on the principle of social solidarity, of mutual and reciprocal cooperation. We must be committed to working with each other and taking care of each other throughout our entire lives. Our new socialist institutions and values will ensure that working-age adults help provide for children and the elderly, and that those who are well work to provide for those who are not.

The achievement of such a society will require the construction of enormous and powerful social movements, and we can be sure that the capitalists will work at every moment to coopt or crush them. A major obstacle to the building of powerful labor and social movements in the United States has been the role played by Democratic Party elites, always functioning to ideologically disarm, organizationally disrupt, and institutionally incorporate such movements back into the capitalist system. We must work to build powerful independent movements that find political expression in equally independent parties. What kind of mass movement will we need?

New Social Movements: Past social movements—the abolition movement of the first half of the nineteenth century, the 1930s labor movement, the civil rights struggles of the 1950s, the student, anti-war and women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the global justice movement of the 1990s, and more recently Occupy and Black Lives Matter—are evocative. We need to build powerful social movements that challenge all of capitalism's manifestations in every area of our lives.

A New Labor Movement: A reconstructed, democratized workers' movement is critical because workers organized in unions represent potentially the most powerful positive social force in any society. Representing large numbers, the majority of the society, concentrated in significant numbers in workplaces of all sorts from farms, factories, and mines to offices, universities, and hospitals, organized workers can exert enormous economic and social power. We will need rank-and-file movements within the unions to make them more democratic, egalitarian, and militant if we are to change our society.

An Independent Workers' Party: While the Sanders campaign has been inspiring, it remains within the Democratic Party. America's workers need our own political party to fight for power if we are to create not only a new majority in Congress and a new administration in the White House, but a fundamentally new sort of government. Major party realignments in American history have been few and they result from major economic, social, or political crises, but we can and must begin now to make the political arguments for independent political action.

A Fight for Political Power: We want to bring about meaningful reforms immediately to benefit all working-class people, but our ultimate goal is for workers to take political power so that society can be reorganized around our common interests.

It should go without saying that a new socialist movement will incorporate not only what has been learned in the labor movement, but also all of the lessons of the Black and Latino, women's, LGBT, and environmental movements of the last few decades. Our socialism will be democratic, libertarian, and egalitarian or it will not deserve the name "socialism." Constructing a political vision, a new dominant worldview, is the first step to creating a movement, a party, a program, and a strategy to fight for power in the future.

Footnotes