

In 2017, Trump and the ultra-right wrecking crew will continue to roll back history

blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/12/29/in-2017-trump-and-the-ultra-right-wrecking-crew-will-continue-to-roll-back-history/

12/29/2016

In his final post on the aftermath of the 2016 election, [Walter Dean Burnham](#) looks at where the Trump administration and its allies might be leading the US. Looking to history to analyze the present, he writes that the American political universe is based on a liberal individualist tradition, which led to a depoliticization of left-wing voters by the 1960s. This in turn allowed the Republican Party to shift the political spectrum to the right in the 1980s and beyond, a shift which eventually led to the rise of Donald Trump.



This is my final article about the wretched 2016 election and its aftermath. Here I will surmise about where decisions already made by the winners seem to be leading the country. But, as always, a survey of the historical background may provide some clues, particularly when readers of my earlier contributions to this blog consult them too.

Some deep background

We start with two of Karl Marx's more penetrating insights of a century and a half ago.

Capitalism as a system for reorganizing socioeconomic structure is inherently and ferociously revolutionary. Its impact, as it evolves, is explosively and persistently disruptive of any existing states of affairs. Crises in society regularly recur as a consequence.

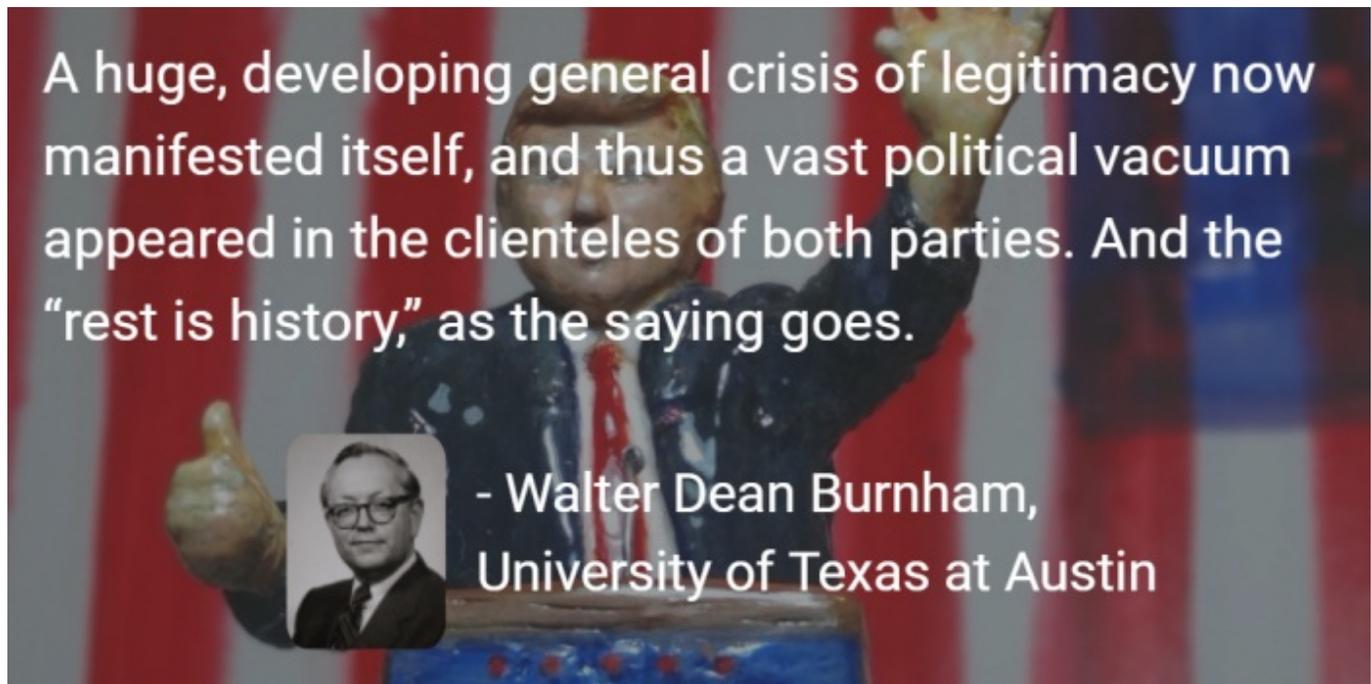
"Men make their own history, but they do not make it under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" ("[The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte](#)," (1852), p. 1). Or, as the Mississippi writer comments, "The Past is not over. Hell, it's not even past." Of all white Americans, Southern descendants of the 1861-1865 Confederacy would recognize Faulkner's point right away.

What distinguishes the American political culture from all others? Half a century ago, Louis Hartz penned a seminal analysis, [The Liberal Tradition in America](#) (1955). The comparative point he makes is that "The American way of life" is embedded in the philosophy developed by John Locke's (1632-1704) [Second Treatise of Government](#) (1690). Terms for this phenomenon vary: "Lockian Liberalism," "Proprietarian individualism," and so forth. The vital point is that this bundle of ideas is hegemonic in the US, and is a foundation for the common belief in American exceptionalism.

My model of the foundation of the American political universe – critical elections, "stable" phases (so-called) and the heavily class-based decline in turnouts – is based on this "single tradition" of Lockian liberalism. In other nations, capitalist industrialization had spawned the political organization of working-class voters and intellectuals into modern social democratic/socialist/labourite parties.

In the United States, the [absence of such a development](#) created numerous and conflicting social strata, each competing for the minimal benefits offered by corporate capitalism. Thus, the forms of democratic procedure survived only at the expense of depoliticizing the great mass of potential left-wing voters. By the late 1960s, the war of powerless strata against other powerless strata only furthered the drift toward forthright authoritarianism: politicization this late in history only leads to dual and equally undemocratic alternatives. Mainstream political science scholars had always stressed the existence and significance of "democratic reform publics" as essential

supports for the continuation of liberal democracy. Such publics largely passed from the scene in the 1970s.



Jumps to the right and the politics of disintegration

Since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, a series of stepwise “jumps” have shifted the political spectrum rightwards: in 1994, 2000 and (especially) in 2010, reinforced in 2014 and 2016, with the election of Donald Trump and Republican control in most other parts of government, from state legislatures to US Senators and the House of Representatives. Another factor has been the evolution of the Republican Party as an [ever-more ideology of right-wing extremism](#).

Two other developments reinforced the politics of disintegration:

- The Great Economic Crash/Recession of 2008-2011, the adverse effects of which lingered for long afterwards for millions of workers and their families. This, of course, was an “impossible” trauma, according to the canons of “neo-orthodox” economists.
- The election of 2008, and re-election in 2012 of Barack Obama, the first African-American to win the presidency.

The first sign of trouble was the Tea Party movement in 2009. Perhaps the second was the election in January 2010 of Republican Scott Brown to fill the Senate vacancy created by the long-time “Lion of the Senate,” Ted Kennedy (D. Mass). Then came the Republican landslide of 2010, when Democrats lost (among other things) 63 House seats. Their worst showing since 1946.

For reasons [discussed](#) in my earlier articles, a huge, developing general crisis of legitimacy now manifested itself, and thus a vast political vacuum appeared in the clienteles of both parties. And the “rest is history,” as the saying goes.

With the federal government now in an intensely polarized stalemate state, what next? You cannot get there from here. In American politics, 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 what is needed is not tinkering but revitalization. Now, enter Donald Trump and his deeply reactionary image as a leader of a movement to roll back the wheel of history.

Featured [image credit: Momma Loves The Donald \(Flickr, Public Domain\)](#)

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Walter Dean Burnham is Professor Emeritus at the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Professor Burnham is best known for his work on the dynamics of American politics (particularly electoral politics). His chief areas of concentration have been on the causes, characteristics and consequences of critical realignments in American history, and the modern-day decay of partisan linkages between rulers and ruled. Much of his recent work has also concentrated on the “turnout problem” and its relationship to other elements of change in American politics. Before coming to Texas in 1988, he was Ruth and Arthur Sloan Professor of Political Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



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