

The Crisis of American Democracy and the Rise of the MAGA neo-fascist Project

By Gonzalo Santos, Nov. 20, 2024 [114th Anniversary of the Mexican Revolution]

For some time now, I and other analysts have been sounding the alarm to the approaching implosion of the political and democratic governance system of the United States – the increase chances of witnessing a collapse of its longstanding political duopoly and the systematic evisceration of its federalist constitutional power-sharing arrangements vis-à-vis the states and the co-equal branches of government, and its replacement by a new, authoritarian mode of rule.

For over two centuries the American democratic system, with its many flaws and limitations, provided for reasonable democratic governance, within an institutional, elaborate system of checks and balances capable of adapting to the country's changing geographic and demographic dimensions, address international and domestic challenges, and periodically expand the social contract to accommodate whatever social rebellions erupted demanding new rights. It became the most durable system of secular, republican democracy in the modern world – one based on the rule of law, regular free and fair elections, separation of church and state, and the orderly, peaceful transition of power.

One could take the sanguine view, as the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin did in the early 20th century, that this system of American democracy and all other forms of “bourgeois democracy” constituted in Europe at the time were, in actuality, “the perfect carapace for class rule” in a capitalist society, without taking away how dynamic, popular, and durable such systems became. In fact, the Bolshevik revolution triumphed in Imperial Russia precisely because it *lacked* such a system of legitimation of bourgeois class rule to handle the disastrous Tsarist defeat in World War I – which contrasted sharply with the ability of the equally defeated Imperial Germany to transition to the Weimar Republic and, thusly legitimized, easily beat back the socialist revolutionary insurrection that followed (to the great surprise and disappointment of Lenin and Trotsky).

Likewise, the great Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci theorized in the 1920s that the primary function of these parliamentary systems of representative democracy was to allow and facilitate the establishment of cross-class alliances or “historic blocks” in each advanced capitalist country, all led by successive leading sectors of their otherwise numerically tiny “power elites” (C. Wright Mills), who rely much more on their “hegemonic discourse,” compelling vision of the general good, and the judicious use of their vast wealth to coopt the rebellious classes, than on deploying the coercive apparatus of the State to assert its class dictatorship, securing through actual leadership the consent – and even enthusiastic participation – of most, if not all, subordinate social strata in a capitalist society. Force is to be used as a last resort, signaling more a crisis of legitimacy of the capitalist elites than their staying power – the bane of “comprador” ruling elites in peripheral and semi-peripheral areas of the world-system.

Certainly, there are many examples of such moments in modern American history, the most significant being the American Civil War, which led to the defeat of the Confederacy and its planter class which started that war. But there are also many examples of the fierce repression of the labor movement, which nonetheless led to its incorporation into the Democratic half of the duopoly during the New Deal era. Likewise many others social movements, most prominently the African American movement. In all these cases, American democracy worked, albeit after much struggle, to restore the equilibrium by expanding the social contract to include previously excluded social sectors. In other capitalist, nominally

democratic countries, things got out of control. This is the case with the rise and demise of fascism in Germany, Spain, and Italy after World War I - all defeated in World War II, during the transition from collapsing British global hegemony to triumphant American global hegemony.

The claim we are now making is that this dynamic, successful, durable system of American democracy entered into its visible – perhaps terminal - crisis at the turn of the 21st century. We will not describe in detail the ominous turn to sharply curtailed civil liberties and turn towards a Surveillance State in the aftermath of 9/11, the disastrous land wars in Asia that followed, or the financial meltdown at the end of the Bush Jr. two terms, all calamities which liberal Establishment Democrats like Senators Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden supported and the next president, Barack Obama, badly mismanaged.

Suffice it to say that the liberal Democrats stubbornly sought to continue to play by the “bipartisan” rules of the duopoly that had served them so well in the past, when it should have become clear to them that the other half had *no intention whatsoever to continue to play the Duopoly Games*. The Republican Party – its Establishment core and its new radical Tea Party wing - led the self-deluded Democrats by the nose with empty promises of collaboration, while they blocked just about everything proposed by Obama – mostly by abusing the filibuster in the Senate and blocking all bills in the House when they gained control of it in 2011.

“Obamacare” was the singular exception, barely achieved during Obama’s first two years in office, a program which, though it was significantly watered down to appeal to Republicans, was passed by a whisker without a single Republican vote in March of 2010. After the Republicans gained control of the House, no significant Obama legislation ever passed again for the remainder of his two terms, including comprehensive immigration reform bills, pro-labor bills, pro-climate control bills, infrastructure bills, etc. Obama kept chasing the ghost of bipartisanship to the very end.

Under that failure to deliver results by the liberals, enter Donald Trump in 2016 and his reign of chaos. He repeatedly tried and failed to repeal Obamacare, the DACA program for Dreamers, and other executive actions. He pulled out of the nuclear deal with Iran and the Paris climate accord. He paralyzed NATO and flirted with North Korea and Russia. He blackmailed Mexico with tariffs and imposed them on China. He stacked the Supreme Court with religious zealots. He tried and failed to violently repress the Black Lives Matter constitutionally-protected protests with the Army. He tried, and for a while succeeded, separating thousands of asylum-seeking families and caging thousands of refugee children, then losing track of them. He passed a massive tax cut favoring the superrich. He badly bungled the COVID pandemic response, which led to the preventable death of hundreds of thousands of Americans. And the man proved to be a pathological liar, a corrupt grifter, a race baiter provocateur and neo-Nazi apologist, a rabid xenophobe, and a predatory misogynist. The Republican Party’s base loved it all and, with the assistance of a formidable jingoistic right wing media ecosystem, clamored for more.

By January 6, 2021, after Trump lost his reelection bid, it became clear the most sacred rule of the duopoly – the peaceful transfer of power - was deliberately broken by one of the two parties – the Republican Party, beholden to their insurrectionary president, Donald Trump. Far from this and many other episodes of Trump’s egregious lawbreaking and high crimes leading to Republican contrition and rectification by banishing Trump from politics or holding him accountable, Trump quickly reasserted total control of the Republican Party. And over the past four years of Biden’s timorous presidency, Trump has successfully navigated and beaten his many felony charges and convictions, brought before and during his now successful reelection campaign. Now that he won, he can and will pardon himself if

necessary, as well as all those who assaulted the U.S. Capitol or were charged with malfeasance in his prior administration.

Today Trump is roaring back to power triumphantly, enjoying Supreme Court-preapproved immunity for any further crimes he may commit “officially” and pursuing full-spectrum control of all branches of the federal government and the Republican Party. He intends to prevail this time around and bring the duopoly and the entire federal government “to heel.” He has his sights set on dismantling what he calls the Administrative State, abolish entire federal departments, reverse all of Biden’s executive actions, try to abolish Obamacare one more time, unleash the full power of state repression upon millions of immigrant families and diasporic communities, and reconfigure the duopoly democratic system of rule into a monopoly, authoritarian system.

We seek to understand how it came to be that this thoroughly institutionalized, seemingly unassailable democratic political and governance system – one that worked so well during the meteoric rise of the United States to world power status in the latter half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th, and then again when the U.S. achieved supreme global hegemony in the mid-20th century and retained it well into the 1980s – took such a decidedly downward turn, first towards hyper-partisan polarization, then ideological chaos and governmental dysfunction, all coinciding with the end of the bipolar world order that the U.S. itself had triumphantly presided over for half-a-century - the Pax Americana of the Cold War era.

In hindsight, it is now becoming clear that the decline and loss of U.S. global hegemony not only led to increased geopolitical and economic chaos in the world, dangerously affecting world governance, but also destabilized – perhaps irreparably - the United States’ own domestic system of democratic politics and governance.

None of this was anticipated or expected. No scholar correctly foresaw how the Cold War would end - with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse and dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the wholesale demise of the “Soviet Camp,” all without a bullet being fired, of its own dead weight and peacefully (Yugoslavia and Chechnya excepted).

In the West, especially in the United States, a sense of vindication, triumphalism and euphoria prevailed, allegedly “proving” the superiority of the American Way, with organic intellectuals of the duopoly, like Francis Fukuyama, fancifully proclaiming “the end of history”, and others like Samuel Huntington more cautiously warning of the coming “clash of civilizations” between the “freedom-loving” West and the emerging regions with “incompatible values,” and thus the continued need for the U.S.-led West to circle the wagons against the Rest.

This domestic debate, infused with Eurocentrism and American Exceptionalism as it was, continued all the way to the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001 on U.S. soil, which settled the debate in favor of the “clash” perspective, and gave the U.S. a new post-Cold-War global mission – the expansion, requiring aggressive military means, of democracy and Western values worldwide, all in the name of waging the so-called “Global War on Terrorism” against “the Axis of Evil.”

The entire duopoly embraced this new messianic mission and overwhelmingly backed the launching of two disastrous land wars in Central Asia during the Bush Jr. presidency – Afghanistan and Iraq – which soon proved to be endless, unwinnable quagmires that cost trillions of dollars to sustain, sacrificed

millions of lives, squandered American prestige, almost bankrupted its economy, and accelerated, rather than reversed, the demise of U.S. global hegemony.

President Obama – the “peace candidate” in 2008 - took until late 2011 to extricate the U.S. from Iraq, with nothing to show for it, while hostile Iran gained enormous influence there. And he failed to extricate the U.S. from the endless war in Afghanistan, which would go on draining treasure, lives, and prestige until president Trump negotiated with the sworn enemy Taliban the terms of U.S. ignominious withdrawal late in his term, and left president Biden to execute – badly – that exit. Again, the American people were left aghast at the spectacle of four presidencies, from both parties of the duopoly, launching and badly discharging disastrous, costly wars with absolutely nothing to show for the six trillion dollars spent over the course of 20 years, except humiliating defeat and retreat.

That geopolitical and economic disaster alone (including the accompanying financial meltdown of 2008) should have triggered a severe crisis of the duopoly, as it finally began to happen in 2015 with the shocking rise of MAGA Trumpism. And yet, this was not the whole story.

Something else was at work corroding the foundations of American duopoly rule and consensus and shattering U.S. domestic tranquility, with had roots found as far back as the Cold War era itself, which only scholars of the world-systems perspective school of historical sociology theorized and correctly predicted (Wallerstein, Arrighi, Gunder Frank, Amin).

For these scholars, the “World Revolution of 1968” in the world-system – encompassing youthful social rebellions of all sorts – in the West against the Vietnam War, racism, sexism and homophobia, the shallow consumerist culture, and the enforced, rigid conformity to authority; in the East against the Soviet Union’s violent suppression of independence and freedom in Eastern Europe, and the lack of political freedom in the Soviet Union itself; and in the so-called Third World, against the betrayal of national liberation aspirations by both interventionist superpowers and their client state corrupt elites – represented a wholesale rejection and delegitimation of the two commanding ideologies sustaining that Cold War world order: Wilsonian/New Deal liberalism and Marxism-Leninism (fascism had been thoroughly defeated and discredited after World War II).

Though this “1968 world revolution” was politically defeated in all “three worlds” and the Cold War proceeded apace, a fundamental shift in the “geoculture” legitimizing the bipolar world order was fatally compromised; and in due time, this would lead to the wholesale repudiation of Marxism-Leninism in the socialist camp (formerly the “Second World”), which collapsed and disappeared in 1989-91. That major world event concealed the more gradual repudiation of world-hegemonic Wilsonian/New Deal liberalism as the guiding ideology not just in the U.S.-led “Free World,” but in the U.S. itself. (In the Third World, the repudiation of authoritarianism led to various democratic “springs” and “transitions” among some countries, the forceful reassertion of authoritarianism in others.)

On the American left, the intellectual seeds had been planted in the U.S. by the “New Left” intellectuals/activists: Herbert Marcuse and her disciple Angela Davis, Noam Chomsky, Saul Alinsky, Betty Friedman and Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldúa, Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Malcolm X, Bert Corona, Rudy Acuña and Juan Gómez-Quiñones, all of whom explained the need for, validated, and encouraged the anti-imperialist, feminist, labor and ethnic rebellions for decades to come.

On the American right, the previously marginalized anti-liberal critiques of Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Leo Strauss, Ayn Rand, and Milton Friedman began to gain traction with significant economic and political sectors of the power elite who were opposed to the reigning liberal doctrine of political economy known as *Keynesianism* – the New Deal doctrine justifying the regulatory, economic interventionist, redistributive “Welfare State” – as well as opposed to building the “multicultural society,” the spread of feminism and “identity politics” in the aftermath of the Civil Rights/Women’s Movements.

As late as the Richard Nixon presidency – when Nixon said “We are all Keynesians now,” and his administration institutionalized for the first time all sorts of “affirmative action” policies, programs and initiatives to defuse and coopt the revolt of the 60s/early 70s – , the duopoly was functioning as it was meant to, under the ideological hegemony of Wilsonian/New Deal liberalism, with conservatism as its respectable avatar, playing the role of “loyal opposition” in a perennially minority status in Congress.

But beginning with the triumph of Ronald Reagan in 1980, and the ushering of the so-called “Reagan Revolution,” the spectacular ascendancy of the conservative right over the liberal left became an irreversible trend within the duopoly, inverting the previous imbalance of ideological and political power.

From then on, the American duopoly began to be guided foremost by the market-fundamentalist, anti-statist theories propounded by the anti-liberal thinkers already mentioned. The Republican Party boldly adopted an aggressive program of rolling back and dismantling the redistributive programs and policies of the New Deal, especially its Welfare State policies and programs meant to expand the social contract to include and benefit the working classes, women, and the historically excluded ethnic social sectors. These programs and policies were all now deemed to have been implemented at the expense of the American plutocracy, its rate of accumulation of wealth, and the urgent need to replace Keynesian economics with an unfettered version of pure market capitalism. This led to launching the corporate globalization project abroad, and paved the way for the return to the Robber Baron era of monopoly capitalism at home.

The ideological war against New Deal liberalism, multiculturalism and feminism took off domestically as intensely as the renewed geopolitical Cold War against the by-then stagnant and wobbling rival socialist superpower. The liberal side of the duopoly ceased to have the initiative, both internationally and domestically.

The Reagan/Bush Sr. era of the 1980s witnessed a frontal assault on multiculturalism and feminism – ,as well as the revival of Cold War tensions, with a dramatic arms race meant to bankrupt and/or defeat the Soviet “Evil Empire” and reassert dominion in the Western Hemisphere via the Central American U.S. wars of counterinsurgency – the historic origins of massive refugee flows to the U.S., which were persecuted as *economic illegal aliens* until well into the 1990s, when the counterinsurgency wars winded down and these refugees were granted temporary TPS status (which they still depend on).

The term “liberal” became an epithet in the United States during Reagan’s two terms and Bush Sr.’s one term, made to be seen as repulsive to long-indoctrinated Americans as “socialist.” The term “conservative” regained a respectable status not seen since the era prior to the New Deal. Soon, the establishment liberals became “neoliberal” avatars of Reagan conservatism – most prominently Bill and Hillary Clinton, and later Barack Obama and Joe Biden. That ideological sleight of hand slowed down the liberal march to oblivion, but it did not stop it.

Gaining strength in the Bush/Cheney “neoconservative” years, and in the “Tea Party” reactionary “astro-turf” (funder & media manufactured) social rebellions during the Obama years, the conservative ascendancy metastasized into a true populist mass movement - MAGA Trumpism – , which soon took possession of one of the two major parties of the duopoly, from 2015 onwards, and shockingly won the presidency for Donald Trump in 2016.

The duopoly drift away from New Deal liberalism and towards evermore radical forms of conservatism since the ascent of Reaganism has become the clear, unmistakable ideological trajectory within the duopoly, and increasing support from the disaffected electorate in the new century.

In the latter category, we have seen how MAGA Trumpism first took hold among rural whites, new white supremacist/nativist groups, abandoned working class communities, and radicalized Evangelicals; now, in the aftermath of the 2024 elections, we have just witnessed how it has spread – significantly if differentially – across all income levels, non-white ethnicities, age groups, religions, and geographic regions. And among the U.S. plutocracy, we have witnessed the open public embracing of MAGA Trumpism by a growing sector of the billionaire class – spearheaded by Elon Musk, the richest man in the world.

In sharp contrast, the repeated efforts to return to and launch a “New New Deal,” and embark on a progressive/radical path within the other – Democratic – half of the duopoly, symbolized by the two presidential campaigns of democratic socialist Senator Bernie Sanders, failed to succeed, first through DNC liberal sabotage and subsequently by Black and white liberals uniting around old cold warrior Joe Biden, reflecting the contrasting fortunes of left and right radical challenges to the duopoly. In 2024, the progressive challenge petered out completely, subsuming its progressive wing to the failed liberal presidential campaigns of Joe Biden and then Kamala Harris, who tacked to the right in vain pursuit of ghost disaffected Republican voters.

Likewise, the various social rebellions in the new century – from the Immigrant Rights Movement’s mobilizations in 2006, 2010, and 2013/14, to the anti-Wall Street Occupy Movement in 2011, the Women’s Marches in 2016 and following years, the Peace Movement that rose to oppose the U.S. wars in Central Asia in the early 2000s and now the war in Gaza, the Black Lives Matter mobilizations of 2020, the Climate Change protests since 2018, the March for Our Lives in 2018 – all came and went, mobilizing millions but without altering the plutocratic hold on the duopoly, or stopping the return of the MAGA Trumpist fascist project.

Today, we are witnessing the impending rupture of the duopoly democratic structures themselves, and their impending replacement with a fascist project of authoritarian rule, which has not predilection or patience towards “bourgeois democracy” or Gramscian peaceful, consent-based rule.

So, what appeared as a one-sided defeat and rejection of one of the rival ideologies at the end of the U.S.-sponsored Cold War world order – Marxism Leninism – turned out to have been merely the earlier, *first* casualty of the 1968 world geocultural revolution; while the demise of the *other* rival ideology, Wilsonian/New Deal liberalism – the other winning ideology legitimized by the defeat of European fascism and the successful launching of the high-consumption, socially inclusive model of capitalism – took a little while longer, ceding ground to evermore radical conservative challenges, only to be abandoned finally by the insatiable plutocracy who allied with the most reactionary social sectors, and, in the absence of a viable left radical alternative, won over vast swaths of the disaffected American

population. And with this ominous development, the entire institutional political, economic, and social order of American democracy so painstakingly built is in imminent danger of facing its forceful demise and replacement by direct, autocratic, plutocratic rule.

Domestically, it means the installment of a unitarian, authoritarian, neo-fascist state, which will abolish the liberal era's inclusive and expansive social contract and seek to dismantle the institutions of the multiracial/multicultural society. This will ignite extensive social rebellions, which will trigger the violent, unchecked state suppression of them. This spiral of conflict and chaos will deepen until a new vision arises from the social forces resisting the MAGA neo-fascist project and is somehow able to establish a more participatory, equitable, and democratic system of politics and governance *unbeholden to the plutocracy* – a blueprint to go *beyond* the clearly anachronistic forms of bourgeoisie democracy like the old duopoly, perhaps even go beyond capitalism itself. That's for the social forces to figure out how far to go. But that they will have to resist and fight back in sort of "intersectional" united front – preferably in coordination with the anti-systemic social movements across the world – they will no doubt have to.

Internationally, the U.S. under Trump 2.0 will certainly deepen the chaos in world governance and exacerbate geopolitical and economic tensions. A retrenchment to mercantilist/protectionist policies and tariffs will only isolate the U.S. further from the world economy, to the benefit of the emerging center of gravity of the world-economy in East Asia, centered on China. In contrast, the North American region will fragment under the weight of immigrant expulsions and attacks on the U.S. Latino ethnic diasporas, the imposition of onerous tariffs on neighboring countries, and the threats of U.S. military interventionism.

Other areas of the world – Europe and the Middle East, especially – will be profoundly affected and destabilized. Now that Joe Biden's gambit to unite NATO Europe, after Putin brutally invaded Ukraine, reassert U.S. hegemony, and fight "to the last Ukrainian" so as to militarily degrade and economically cripple the Russian state, has failed, Trump might very well pull the U.S. out of NATO and leave Europe to fend for itself. The climate accords will collapse under U.S. boycott under the oil and gas-friendly Trump regime. And Trump may very well greenlight an Israeli war with Iran and allow it to annex Gaza and the West Bank permanently, both with unforeseen consequences. The United Nations Security Council will continue to be utterly paralyzed, at a time the world desperately needs leadership, without any prospects of any reform in sight.

The world's systemwide problems have no prospect under Trump 2.0 of arriving at any systemwide solutions. Despite the urgency and gravity of the situation, this unexpected turn to fascist projects in the core of the world-system, and this glaring absence of a regrouped, visionary, emancipatory vision for a new, more equitable, just, and sustainable world order, are the painful pangs of a capitalist world social system that refuses to die, and a new one that cannot be birthed.

In the meantime, damage to the American social order and to the international order will be extensive. Things will get much worse before they get better. It may very well be the case that the MAGA Trumpist neo-fascist project will take hold indefinitely and cause such catastrophes that it will have to be forcefully dislodged through a combination of external pressures – by an array of world and regional powers – and the domestic resistance and rebellion of the battered and radicalized sectors of the American people, undaunted by the repression they will surely face.

No one can foresee the future of the nation and the future of the world. But both are now hanging in the balance of history. Which way it will tilt will depend on each and every one of us.

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