

# The Current Political Situation

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## **PROLOGUE**

**T**he presidential election has displaced baseball as our national pastime. It has now become a four-year campaign in several phases. As soon as a presidential election is completed, the pundits begin to speculate about who may challenge the incumbent, from the putative opposition and, if the incumbent is term-limited, who in his own party will replace him. The second phase has become a two-year primary campaign in which the main criterion for political viability is whether the candidate has raised sufficient funds to be taken seriously by the party, but especially by the media. In 2008, it is likely that a single day, February 5, will be decisive for selecting the candidates of both parties. New York, California and Texas will hold their primaries on that day; together they constitute more than half the number of the electoral votes needed to lock the nomination for a candidate.

Throughout the process, those with high-paid handlers advise their race-horse to say as little about public issues as possible because their statements may be used against them by opponents in their own party, let alone the other major party. So it is not surprising that the frequently-staged debates become snore fests to which the electorate pays scant attention. More relevant are newspaper and television accounts of the campaigns, most of which assiduously ignore the so-called “minor” candidates because they either lack funds and/or have failed to build significant organizations and obtain important endorsements from party officials or key constituents like the unions and the fundamentalist Christian groups. In terms of the issues, perhaps only the Iraq war has provided some indication of difference, but only among the Democrats. While generally opposed to the war, the Democratic candidates vary in opinion about how to end it. As for health care, all of the “major candidates” favor keeping the private insurance companies in the game and only John Edwards has placed ameliorating inequality at the center of his campaign.

The third phase is the election itself where Democrats and Republicans spar over the burning issue of who can be tougher on the terrorists, a rhetoric that is a sign that they will not dispute the need to maintain a high level of military preparedness, an eventuality that virtually precludes addressing social needs. Lacking imagination and radical will, the liberal, no less than the mainstream media, refuses to depart from the scripts dictated by the fact

that the two parties have been, and remains representative of different fractions of capital and panders to their respective powerful constituencies.

Privately, as individuals, many radicals pay a lot of attention to electoral politics, if only because candidates and elections dominate and even overwhelm the mainstream and the liberal news media alike. Since the Left has no real presence in national electoral politics and its intervention at the local and the state level is only slightly more significant, there is almost no serious analysis and conversation about these matters. As a result, (masquerading as the official Left) the liberal media and groups like Move On have the field almost exclusively to themselves. They have been permitted to limit political analysis and commentary to mostly superficial discussions of the failures of Bush foreign policy, especially the disastrous record of the American aggression in Iraq. And, because they lack a set of criteria by which to render judgment, (like the unions) the loyalties of traditional movements — black freedom activists, feminists and environmentalists — are divided among the Centrist Democratic candidates who are in control of the field. For this reason, their impact on the process and the outcome is blunted. Moreover, lacking a political base — either a party or political formations that have access to a wider public — their choices are often “subjective” or even unprincipled. For example, many who would lean toward a good third party candidate or toward a candidate who challenges within the Democratic primary, like Dennis Kucinich, argue that since neither alternative is “realistic,” given the vagaries of the winner-take-all electoral system and the money imperative, choosing a Centrist is the only alternative. An independent candidate, like Ralph Nader, or a Democratic progressive like Kucinich, does not have a chance to win; therefore it is better to support one of the three top candidates in the faint hope that at least things won’t be as disastrous as the Bush administration has proven to be. Despite her blatant militarism, Hilary Clinton is the choice of some, most recently the 1.4 million member American Federation of Teachers, because her candidacy and subsequent election would be historic, as would the candidacy, let alone victory, of Barack Obama, whose credentials seem to revolve around his early opposition to the Iraq war and his African heritage. The John Edwards camp has several major union endorsements, especially the United Steelworkers, the largest production union, and the diminished, but legendary, Mineworkers. Edwards distinguished himself by announcing his presidential campaign among the ruins of New Orleans and has sounded a steady anti-poverty drumbeat, unlike his opponents who are content to prattle about Iraq without any real point, except to pander to the latest public opinion polls. And all of the Democrats — excepting Kucinich who

has said, simply and tellingly, that Medicare should be universalized, a position that would exclude private insurance companies from making profits — have offered plans that retain the horrendous privatization that prevails today.

The seemingly interminable presidential primaries and the lack of serious debate about the major issues facing the American people reflect a profoundly demobilized underlying population. The unceasing assault on public goods, waged by the Right and Center-Right Democrats, helped collapse the once vibrant urban movements of tenants and parents; meanwhile, labor and Black organizations, feminism, and radical environmentalists have failed to unite. Mainstream media are situated somewhere between center-right and ultra-right. What remains of American New Deal liberalism, the weak representation of a contemporary center-left, is condensed into a few listserves such as *Move On*, three or four journals of opinion, all of which constitute, together with a few dozen elected Congress people, the putative left wing of the Democratic party. They are tolerated because they raise considerable sums of money and can be counted upon to deliver a certain fraction of the professional and middle class vote, and because they have a constituency among intellectuals of sorts; but, above all, they stand as a bulwark on the Left against the possibility of independent politics. There is no more militant champion of the electoral status quo than the liberal journals; and one may argue that the left-liberal establishment plays a decisive role in promoting the political discourse of reform, against all evidence that 20<sup>th</sup> century progressive reform is all but exhausted and belongs to the past.

Lacking a genuine left opposition, the diversion that we call the national electoral arena is relatively easy to perpetuate. Its main function is to mask, even suppress, the burning questions. The deepening ecological crisis has been given no serious attention by any of the candidates, an absence that makes Al Gore's insistence on addressing the crisis appear heroic. There is a multiplicity of signs that the United States is experiencing, if not yet officially, a serious downturn in economic activity. Negative figures of job creation were reported in summer 2007 for the first time in four years. The much-publicized mortgage meltdown is widely predicted to immediately affect more than two million households. Mass layoffs in some key production and service industries, such as mortgage lending institutions, including banks, Internet providers, the spiraling costs of prescription drugs and other facets of health care, and slumping retail sales due, largely, to the credit squeeze on consumers, already deep in personal debt, may finally have produced a screeching halt in buying. None of these aspects of our economic or ecological crises are at the center of the political debate. Instead, the

media plays the game of trivial revelations, such as who offers sex in the men's room, or what thug raised millions for Hilary Clinton, which she was forced to return.

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Eating lunch at City University of New York's (CUNY's) Graduate Center in early September, I was asked by a Brazilian researcher "why is the American Left so quiet?" Like most radicals, her first question was "what's happening with the movements?" I had to explain the sorry state of the "new" social movements, not needing to dwell on the rapidly disappearing unions and other traditional movements. What she might read by way of left researchers and commentators is likely to put into effect the Washington insider mode; that is, the writers want to know what officials think and do, and, for the past six years have been obsessed with the Bush administration and its shenanigans. Or, where she might find voices of an alternative Left, even from commentators with some traction in the public sphere, she will find them addicted to the practice of detailing what corporate America is doing to us, as if the constant repetition of various perfidies will persuade their presumed audience to rise up in protest. But we have learned that hardly anyone is moved by the facts, unless they are predisposed to hear them in the right context. Perception trumps information and interpretation is necessary to give meaning to perception; but the Left is largely bereft of fresh insight, because it is enthralled by fact-mongering. However, there are deeper reasons for the current weakness of the **Opposition**, which is the subject of this discussion.

My Brazilian friend was speaking from a Latin American perspective, a region that has experienced profound social upheaval in which social movements have played a cutting-edge role. But she might have been similarly puzzled by the Europeans. The UK Left (the Labor Party and the unions), which — despite rumblings and mutterings from the shards of the Labor Left and what remains of British Trotskyism — is all but complicit with the neo-liberal Blair era. The replacement of Tony Blair by Gordon Brown promises only marginal grounds for hope. More likely is the gesture of UK troop withdrawal from Iraq or a strategic redeployment from combat to advisement, while domestic policies will be essentially continuous with Blair's slow but steady assault on social benefits. And, although Nicolas Sarkozy's victory in France has obscured the fact that the combined Center Left of Socialists, Greens, Communists and the Extreme Left parties actually

won a majority among the 18-55 population (the Socialist presidential candidate was defeated in the second round by a heavy Sarkozy vote among pensioners and other older voters), there are few shining examples of a vital European Left. The disarray among the members of the Center-Left coalition that still governs Italy and the earlier electoral results that brought the conservatives to power in Germany provide less solace. Still, notwithstanding the tendency of Labor and the Socialists to bow to neo-liberal expediency, the Left Europeans, including the militant fraction of unions, seem to exhibit genuine ability to offer occasional resistance to the Right's attempt to roll back the somewhat tattered post-war compromise that brought wide-ranging social benefits.

As for the United States, resistance is confined to scattered local actions, the great recent exception being a massive immigrant movement that electrified the entire country, including a normally xenophobic and recalcitrant Congress. In 2006, a million people marched in dozens of cities and small and medium sized towns for immigrant rights. Congress and the Bush administration responded by offering a severely compromised bill that, while granting some legalization chances to 12 million undocumented immigrants, would impose a Guest Worker program, subject applicants for legalization to draconian rules, and perhaps most egregiously, buttressed border police and other anti-immigrant forces with massive new funds. We are witnesses to the spectacle of a leading Democratic candidate for President, Hilary Clinton, who ardently supports the erection of physical barriers on the US Mexican border and "realistically" wants to restrict immigration by other means as well. Some immigrant organizations and their advocates seem willing to comply with these features on the argument that the bill would open the door to legalization. But, as it turned out, opponents on the Congressional Left as well as on the Right combined to defeat it, at least for now. As this draft article is written (Sept 7, 2007), the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, comprised, largely, of immigrant workers, has just concluded a remarkably successful strike against the combined efforts of the Bloomberg administration and the large taxi owners on the issue of surveillance devices in the cabs. The Taxi and Limousine Commission installed the devices anyway. Even though the drivers are worried that the devices will track their routes, they are also protesting the lack of health insurance, pensions and other benefits that are concomitant to their ostensible status as "contractors" rather than wage workers. Perhaps highest on their list of grievances is a relatively ambiguous complaint that they are not treated with "dignity," a charge that borders on accusing the Commission and the Bloomberg administration of racism and anti-immigrant bias, since

most of the drivers are now from several countries of Southeast Asia, especially India and Pakistan. Although the City did not retreat, the executive director of this unique union — one of the new breed of organizations that do not organize on the basis of achieving a collective bargaining agreement — stated that if the program is not withdrawn, “this is only the beginning” of further protests, which prompted the Taxi union to stage a second walk-out in late October. In this instance, they were facing not only the taxi owners and the city administration but an almost completely subordinated media that faithfully reported what the Mayor told them: the strike was ineffective. Few reporters bothered to visit key sites, such as the airports, train stations and major taxi stands to discover that only a quarter of the normal cabs were available during the first walkout and 40% during the second.

The anti-war movement, which, in February 2003, organized massive protests in a dozen cities and untold smaller communities on the eve of the Iraq war, many of which organized without stimulation from a “center,” has settled down to business as usual, even as popular sentiment has turned decisively against the war and wants U.S. troops to come home now. On the whole, the marches have under-emphasized the connection between the huge military budget and the steady erosion of social benefits. And we may note the singular dramatic spectacle of Cindi Sheehan, the mother of a soldier killed in the Iraq war, who in 2006 confronted George Bush at the gate to his ranch. She came to feel betrayed by liberal Democrats when they failed to step in behind her to support and escalate the protest. Apparently, they were embarrassed by her imprudent direct action, preferring instead to write letters and sign petitions to legislators and the president.

We ignore, at our own peril, the failure to undertake mass protests for New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Reflecting both racism and the growing militarism of American society, mired in its disdain of public initiative, neither the Bush administration nor its loyal opposition was able to mount an effective rescue. It is appropriate to ask: where was the outrage, and especially where was the Left? The Bush administration and the Louisiana conservative politicians of both parties all but celebrated the permanent evacuation of 200,000 blacks from the city, and they have openly dragged their feet by making only token efforts at reconstruction. This is so not only of the completely devastated Lower Ninth Ward, where many of the displaced lived, but also in other areas where the white working class and largely white middle class struggle to rebuild. New Orleans now stands as a testament to the breakdown of the myth that the state is constituted to protect its citizens in times of natural disasters.

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Tentatively and in no particular order, at least four factors can be identified which may help explain the relative passivity of the fragments of the “organized” Left. (1) The professionalization of major portions of 1960s and 1970s activists. (2) The abandonment by many of an anti-capitalist perspective, and, more significantly, a global perspective on class and class struggles, in favor of piecemeal efforts to win reforms from a state apparatus that has all but openly declared that it is immune from popular movements. (3) The stubborn refusal of left and left-liberal forces to entertain, let alone organize, an independent political formation. Instead, we are witnessing wholesale capitulation to the discredited politics of the popular front in America, which, we recall, abandoned independent politics for an attempt to move the Democrats to the left. (4) The obvious but not yet digested transformation of the state’s legitimation functions into a series of more repressive apparatuses.

First, analysis has consistently overlooked the degree to which many of the 1960s generation, once a genuine political opposition, who were militantly involved in anti-war, civil rights and various forms of community and labor organizing, are now subject to one of the least noticed phenomena of the last forty years. After the movements ebbed, as they inevitably will, at least for a time, many went back to school, earned advanced degrees and ended up in professional and technical positions. They became professors, medical doctors and lawyers, computer experts, investment bankers and counselors; and they flooded the second-tier professions of teaching, nursing, and social work, where in some instances they helped spearhead a new wave of union organizing among qualified public employees, most recently in higher education. Some became officials, that is, professional bureaucrats, of unions in the public sector and have participated, however unwillingly, in turning the rank and file into clients. Given the structure of public employee unionism, where unions administer benefit funds, they had little choice but to become insurance executives. Many have taken up responsibilities in their respective professional associations and try to shove these rather staid institutions to the left. Radical “docs” have become the mainstay of the drive to institute universal socialized medicine (euphemistically called “single payer”); a succession of leftists, along with “progressives” adorn the top elected and appointed officialdom of the Sociological, Historical and Anthropological Associations as well as the American Association of University Professors, the National Association of Social Workers and the American Nurses Association, especially on the two coasts. There are signif-

icant caucuses and activists in the fields of psychology, political science. And, for a time, the deeply conservative Economics Association harbored a coterie of radical economists, not all of whom are or were Marxists.

The professional-client relationship is intrinsically hierarchical. While some education theorists call for a partnership between teacher and student in secondary as well as higher education institutions, the fact is that — even as the professor/teacher's power over their own work and work time is consistently eroded by administration — they are responsible for evaluating students, conferring grades and ultimately determining whether students will achieve the credentials, which, after all, is the main reason students remain in school after high school graduation. In the wake of the corporatization of higher education, where university-corporate partnerships are rapidly becoming the norm, not only in research universities but in other sectors of higher education as well, there is virtually no organized counter-attack. In health care at all levels and in social work, the terms “patient” and “client” signify the nature of the power relationship between professionals and their “object.” Against the will of the professionals, these relationships almost inevitably become introjected and are part of professional character formation, a formation that assists the health corporations to perform their main function: to get rid of patients.

Professionalization does not mean that occupation automatically equals depoliticalization. On the contrary, many 1960s veterans are engaged in honorable political work in their respective domains. But the domain dominates the totality. Professionalized leftists typically find themselves embedded, even ensconced, in their professional duties, and their politics consists in writing worthy articles for professional journals, and fighting within their associations for anti-war, universal health care and academic freedom resolutions. And, sadly, leftist and liberal leaders in the trade unions of teachers, nurses and social work professionals tend to resemble their private sector counterparts: they become contract unionists, that is, engaged in winning the next pay raise, defending against management's demands for concessions and, perhaps most tellingly, administering large or medium sized welfare funds that dispense benefits to members.

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Left to center-left perspectives are still significant among writers of genre fiction and general fiction, mainstream as well as independent filmmakers



and video artists, actors, writers and directors, and the critics of popular and high art. Some play important and even leading roles in entertainment unions. As a result and despite considerable censorship, alternative views find their way into the media. Consider the ever-fertile field of science fiction, especially the prolific output of Kim Stanley Robinson, and the detective novels of Sara Paretsky, or the historical spy novels of Alan Furst, who, like Robinson, is fully versed in political and social theory. The latest post-cold war work of John Le Carre, Don DiLillo and Thomas Pynchon should not be forgotten. Even when post-modernist techniques predominate — an orientation that is frequently more comfortable in cynicism than in critique — at least their work has contributed to bringing politics back into literature after the long drought introduced during the Cold War. Yet, for all these visible successes, I have to assert what should be obvious to any attentive observer: while liberal listserves on the Internet have mushroomed in the past decade, not only have we witnessed further concentration of ownership of mainstream and Internet institutions, but liberal, let alone radical, media outlets are shrinking, particularly in the print media. Now, underground and alternative news weeklies have become the giant “What’s On in Entertainment?,” little more than sheets with just enough content to break up porn and beauty enhancement ads. The quality of those on-line listserves with a deliberate mission of dissent has clearly declined. “Tom Paine,” “Common Dreams,” “Altnet,” and some other Internet news sites are reliable sources of Bush bashing and sometimes offer readers valuable exposes of the latest official calumnies and catastrophies of American foreign and domestic policies, but they remain short of perspective, except for the astounding claim that the task of the left is to awaken the Democratic Party to its responsibility to lead the country out of the wilderness.

Capitulation after capitulation by the Democratic Congressional leadership and the virtual stasis that pervades state houses and most city halls have failed to dampen left enthusiasm for political masochism. It seems there is no betrayal that can shake its faith in the basic, failed strategy that has prevailed since the Peoples Party folded in 1896 in supporting William Jennings Bryan. This strategy was repeated in 1936. Then, a substantial portion of the labor socialists quit the Socialist Party to hop on the Roosevelt bandwagon, not to mention the rightward turn of the popular fronts of the Communist Party who, at the minimum, had an ideological justification for their surrender of revolutionary bolshevism — the priority of the anti-fascist struggle to struggles over class. Even so-called left commentators of the kind one may find in *Portside* and *Counterpunch* are surprisingly weak on analysis and rich in invective. *Counterpunch* is often lively, but

strangely sterile in ideas. In short, we are in the midst of an idea drought, a massive failure of the radical imagination.

Yet, by the ways of contradictions between ideals and practice, one of the main objectives of radical political formations of all types — parties, federations, associations — is still to transform professionals into revolutionary or radical intellectuals. Instead of defining the term “intellectual” as a traditional scholar, or an organic intellectual of the ruling classes, political intellectuals are still understood as people of ideas whose commitment is no longer to the various bureaucratic machines of late capitalism but to the labor and social movements and, more generally, to a global conception of the popular, insurgent forces. They are encouraged to harness their ability to think critically in terms of the totality, to produce and disseminate new ideas, to stimulate public discussion around the burning questions, and to dedicate themselves to the work of political education. This means that they write and create or perform works of art, social criticism or scholarship in all types of media for diverse audiences. For the most part, they are no longer called on to be “professional revolutionaries” in the Leninist sense. They may remain in their occupations, but with a difference.

Now, the political intellectuals are to oppose professional ideology and try to broaden the vistas and the range of activity of their associations, to call for a new unionism in which the contract no longer defines the labor movement. As intellectuals, their relationship to the people with whom they work can be mediated by the political formation. They learn to reflect on relations of power, not only in the macro-political sense, but in everyday life. In the more proletarianized professions, such as teaching and social work, they are supposed to come to terms with their own situation as workers. Or, if they work in the higher professions, they need to see themselves as a social formation locked in a contradictory position; in Poulantzas’ term, a “new” petty bourgeoisie which, at the same time, lacks full autonomy. As salaried employees they are subject to the control from the top of the administrative apparatus; but at the same time, they (we) enjoy an enviable degree of autonomy insofar, as we control much of our own time, can decide, within limits, what we will teach or, if in the health professions, what treatment regimes are most appropriate to meet the specific needs of a patient. As an independent contractor, the artist, in the broadest meaning of the term, is “free” to choose her medium, style, and the mode of distribution of her work. Similar to all entrepreneurs, this freedom is sharply restricted by those who control the culture industry, including the “high” culture institutions and its apparatuses. A genuinely radical political forma-

tion does not pull people out of their privileged spaces and send them into industrial plants (an older strategy of the CP and the Maoists), but engages the professionalized worker and artist in a process of education and self reflection.

In practice, neither the social movements nor the professionalized leftists have much use for the political intellectual. Since the Cold War, the progressive intellectuals have functioned overtly as technicians of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and the institutionalized progressive organizations increasingly attached to it. They have become the intellectual infrastructure of the liberal and labor establishments. These technical intellectuals — “technical” because they are not engaged in producing or disseminating critical ideas — write reform legislation, act as publicists, edit union newspapers and organization newsletters, and in the more electoral mode, are staffers for candidates for public office and for elected officials. At the pinnacle are the strategists of campaigns, key advisors and, in some instances, serve in the federal bureaucracy under centrist administrations as top and middle level bureaucrats. In all of these positions, they are subsumed under the rubric of the art of what is possible within the prevailing political system. In this sense the presupposition of the work is the dead, accumulated intellectual labor of the past.

Elsewhere I have described the main lines of “postmodern” politics as the acceptance, in earnest, of the slogan “think globally, but act locally.” The half truth of this slogan belies its contemporary interpretation: any attempt to develop a politics that opposes the capitalist system, that is, any politics of the totality, is futile. Thus, we are condemned to single issue or small-scale struggles in the hopes of addressing power on a sustainable scale. Many on the Left who have socialism “in their heart” act as if they are part of liberal reform. They are self-described progressives rather than radicals and have, albeit as farce rather than tragedy, reproduced the Popular Front of the anti-fascist era, much on the same grounds. They argue, whether in social movement or electoral politics, that, faced with a renewed rightist danger, attempts to create an independent social and political formation that is explicitly anti-capitalist are unrealistic, even dangerous, because such attempts would invariably separate the left from its liberal allies. To the extent that they engage in national politics, it is to attempt to revive the long failed effort to push the Democratic Party to the left. Otherwise, they are content to engage in single issue politics. This is a second and powerful deterrent to developing a genuine political opposition.

From these trends follows a third: the stubborn refusal of the main forces of the putative Left to forge a new independent political formation, and one not primarily in the electoral arena. In plain words, there is virtually no viable political **Opposition** in the United States and in most of Europe. In Europe we have witnessed the virtual collapse of the Center-Left parties of government; even when they achieve political power, they act like neo-liberals with a human face. In the United States, the “parties,” movements, journals and individuals who fancy themselves radicals, Marxists, anarchists, communists, and socialists function, in the main, as entrepreneurial enclaves or, in the case of intellectuals, private contractors. They are expert at organizational maintenance, but have no will — or capacity — to incite, let alone lead, popular struggles against gentrification, abrogation of academic freedom and other civil liberties, growing income inequality, the steady erosion of workers rights, and the yawning gap which separates the immense majority of blacks from the prevailing historical level of material culture, that is, a comfortable standard of living. Most have long ceased to be troublemakers, so the traditional programs of state surveillance of radicals have opportunistically shifted from a mostly supine left to so-called terrorists.

This raises the question of the evolution of the US state since 9/11. We are witnessing a huge accretion of largely uncontested military spending, but also a new state form of civilian-led militarism. Six years after the attack on the World Trade Center, its effect on the survivors has been devastating: thousands are afflicted with diseases and injuries that remain unattended by public authorities; the rebuilding effort remains mired in conflict and the communities around the WTC site have been excluded from decision-making. In the words of one commentator, Ground Zero is still a hole. Along with Katrina, 9/11 is a visible reminder that the National Security State means, essentially, that its historic repressive functions, now supplemented by a deliberate policy of less-than-benign neglect, far outweigh the so-called legitimization function whose key element was the welfare state or even the elementary obligation of government to secure life, let alone liberty.

Neo-liberalism in the United States takes a specific form consistent with the basic violence of our administrative agencies. The term “market capitalism” means not only the removal of effective state regulation of business activity, the privatization of many public services and the reduction of social benefits, but equally salient, is the shift of the government from “public service” to the elimination of dissent. We are seeing efforts to re-characterize protest

as subversive of our national security — a construction that enables the accumulated police powers to restrict freedom in the name of freedom — and, under the banner of anti-terrorism, to institute massive surveillance in the forms of wire-tapping, cameras on the streets, the specter of universal identity cards and, as we have already seen, the efforts by the government to “inform” employers of the political pedigree of prospective and current employees. Given this climate, we can make sense of the federal government’s drive against immigrants. In recent months, Immigration and Naturalization agents and other government police have staged highly visible raids on factories and have detained or deported hundreds of undocumented workers, a scene reminiscent of the red scare following World War I. In short, given the power of the new technologies of domination, the repressive McCarthy era may, in retrospect, eventually look mild and naive.

Our current political environment is not, as liberal commentators would have us believe, exclusively the work of Bush, his main advisor Karl Rove or the Army Chief of Staff. Many policies of the Bush administration, including the war against Iraq, were introduced by the Carter, Reagan and Clinton administrations. That 9/11 became an occasion to intensify war and political repression (e.g. the heavy hand of the Bloomberg police during the 2004 Republican Convention) cannot be doubted. But it is imperative that we acknowledge that there has been a thirty-year hiatus of significant Congressional initiatives, under Democratic as well Republican majorities. The building of the war machine, and the broad acceptance of privatization, especially in health care, has paralyzed Congress. It is not only that business and right-wing lobbies have prevailed; more pointedly, the legislative process is in perpetual stalemate because Congress has only the power to say “no.” But most notably, Congress chooses never to challenge the elements of the National Security state, including huge military budgets.

I am compelled to raise a question that stands alongside contemporary analysis. For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the example of the Bolshevik Revolution and its product, the Soviet State, loomed over the Left of the entire world as either a shining example or evidence of a revolution gone foul. Pro-Communist or anti-Communist, the leading question was almost never “was the revolution justified, given the social and economic conditions of Russia?,” but rather “why and how did Stalin and his unique doctrine of Socialism in One Country or, later, one region, either save or betray the revolution?” The spectacle of Communism provided a framework for the debate, an inspiration for its radical opponents as well as its fervent advocates and supplicants. A few of the anarchist, Trotskyist and the left-

Socialist camps may have been articulate in their refusal to call what had been built in the Soviet Union “socialism,” and seemed to endlessly debate what to call the regime, “state capitalist,” “bureaucratic collectivist,” “totalitarian” or whatever. But there was no dispute of the fact that the experience of that event virtually established both the limits and the possibilities of political action on a global scale. Every social movement in the developing as well as the developed countries was obliged to position itself with respect to actually existing socialism, including intellectuals and activists of the Left. The fissures of the Left were not those, primarily, of reform versus revolution, the leading question of the period prior to World War I. After 1917, they bore the indelible marks of how to evaluate the results and prospects of international Communism, whose leading appendage was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European client states, and the shift of Chinese and Vietnamese Communism decisively to the capitalist market system and to the ideological right, the Left has lost its bearings. For a time, Fidel and the Cuban revolution sustained a fragment of the Left and, as Latin America has begun to move, Venezuela’s President Hugo Chávez has become the newest object of hope for those who need a living exemplar to provide them with political energy. But we have not yet been able to characterize the post-Cold War era, except to endlessly repeat the truism that now there is a single superpower, the United States, and that capitalism has gone global. We invoke concepts like New Imperialism and Empire, but these fail to take account of the new political realities at the level of domestic politics and of everyday life.

Since socialism became ossified in the bi-polar Cold War era around concepts of state-ism, on the one hand, and the welfare state in the context of liberal democratic institutions, on the other, there has been no forward movement at the level of thought, no new ideas revolving around the fundamental question of what would constitute the Good Life, a system of social relations corresponding to the full development of the collective individual. Indeed, we are in the midst of a wholesale shift, among erstwhile Marxist and radical intellectuals, to a new American celebration of the virtues of liberal democratic institutions. The anarchist writer Paul Berman, the once New Left cultural historian and sociologist Todd Gitlin, political scientist Alan Wolfe, historians Eric Foner and Sean Wilentz are among many others who have rediscovered American civic republicanism. They are exemplary of the drift to the center of intellectuals in the United States. With the main drift to the right and the veritable delegitimation of radical

ideas, what passes today for an opposition is a relatively ill-defined legion of mostly young people who, in their disillusion, are self-described anarchists. Their modus operandi is in creating bookstores, affinity groups and small federations of activists who, in the main, lack a public presence, but do make themselves felt in the demonstrations and direct actions such as anti-automobile bicyclists' "Critical Mass" that periodically dot the landscape, and in the World and US Social forums.

Of course there is a heartening new awareness of the severity of the ecological crisis. From Al Gore and Bill McKibben to Marxists like Joel Kovel, James O'Connor and John Bellamy Foster and those influenced by the pioneering work of Murray Bookchin, there seems to be an outpouring of thought about how to save the planet. The enormity of the question appears daunting, so, most of the practical proposals revolve around various regulation schemes. Yet, almost all of these are, at best, palliatives aimed at slowing the process of climate decay and volatility. Where Marxists and serious ecologists suggest that the entire system of domination, even industrialization itself, is the real culprit in the debate over global warming, none has gone so far as to propose a whole new economic and political system based on the principle of regionalization, as did Kirkpatrick Sale in his book *Human Scale*. Few have taken up Bookchin's bold argument to cut the sinews of what made our civilization, not only fossil fuels but the artifices of chemicals such as plastics and other polymers, as well reorganizing our system of food production, which is now based on crop centralization and on chemical fertilizers.

It is significant that these ideas are still out there, re-stirred by evidence of vast climate change. In short, the phase of consciousness-raising has been brilliantly achieved; what is lacking are the organizational means to conduct the struggle and the political will to raise the ante from regulation to social transformation.

There is some movement for "single payer" health care emanating from the Left. The Conyers bill, HR 676, although somewhat flawed, would go a long way toward this goal. At this moment, 23 state labor councils, a dozen major international unions and countless local labor bodies have endorsed the bill. But advocacy remains at the level of resolution, not concrete action. There has not been a single important national demonstration of popular power in behalf of socialized medicine, even its euphemism. If there remains any taste for direct mass action, it would appear that this would be the issue around which some progress could be made. Faced with

a steady retreat in their health care unions and their members, the leadership might be expected to mount an effective national campaign. But most seem to be trapped in the collective bargaining arena, desperate to save the scraps of their eroded programs. For example, most of the autoworkers negotiations with the Big Three car corporations were focused on whether and how much the union is prepared to surrender to the companies' demand to transfer the burden of health care costs and administration to the union, but at a bargain basement rate. The company proposal has elicited more than usual opposition among the rank and file and a segment of local union leadership. Influenced by buy-outs to senior employees, making temporary workers permanent, company "guarantees" that no further job cuts would occur during the four-year agreement, and sheer despair, the contract was approved by the General Motors rank and file by a margin of around 60%-40%. Lacking even the feeble GM guarantees, Chrysler workers approved the deal by a razor thin margin, and were rewarded a week later by the company's announcement that it would lay off up to 11,000 workers and shut down a number of plants in the next year, added to the 12,000 who already have lost their jobs. Taken together, these cuts would reduce the company's workforce by nearly half. And since we have no consumer movements worthy of that designation, the professionalized new middle class, which often pays through the nose for prescriptions, hospital care and surgery, seems diverted elsewhere.

In sum, the political situation is out of sync with the manifest challenges from within the system. There should be more than enough grounds to build a movement from this country's economic instability. More people are coming to recognize that the "boom" of the last fifteen years was built on the sinking sand of fictitious capital, that is, a regime of capital formation based on a credit system without a substantive foundation in material production. We can ascribe the absence of an **Opposition** to the recomposition of the working class that has resulted in the veritable shattering of labor's power, to the gentrification of the cities (once the citadels of workers' power) with the consequent exodus of white and black labor from its precincts, to the vast delegitimation of public goods, and to the integration of the opposition — intellectuals and practitioners of the movements alike — by the liberal ideological drift, and bureaucratic and repressive processes. The road ahead remains full of obstacles, not the least of which are the burning questions that remain central to our movement: will a new generation of young people emerge, will the fragments of a still radical detachment of the left regroup, and will they come together in a new political formation?