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The American ideology

An unmitigated economic liberalism, masked by a parareligious discourse and packaged with insipid rhetoric about democracy

I

Today, the United States is governed by a junta of war criminals who took power through a kind of coup. That coup may have been preceded by (dubious) elections: but we should never forget that Hitler was also an elected politician. In this analogy, 9/11 fulfils the function of the “burning of the Reichstag”, allowing the junta to grant its police force powers similar to those of the Gestapo. They have their own *Mein Kampf* - the National Security Strategy -, their own mass associations - the patriot organisations - and their own preachers. It is vital that we have the courage to tell these truths, and stop masking them behind phrases such as “our American friends” that have by now become quite meaningless.

Political culture is the long-term product of history. As such, it is obviously specific to each country. American political culture is clearly different from that which has emerged from the history of the European continent: it has been shaped by the establishment of New England by extremist protestant sects, the genocide of the continent’s indigenous peoples, the enslavement of Africans, and the emergence of communities segregated by ethnicity as a result of successive waves of migration throughout the 19th century.

II

Modernity, secularism and democracy are not the result of an evolution in religious beliefs, or even a revolution; on the contrary, it is faith which has had to adjust to meet the requirements of these new forces. This adjustment was not unique to Protestantism; it had the same impact on the Catholic world, though in a different way. A new religious spirit was born, liberated from all dogma. In this sense, it was not the Reformation that provided the pre-condition for capitalist development, even though Weber’s thesis has been widely accepted in the Protestant societies of Europe, which were flattered by the importance it gave them. Nor did the Reformation represent the most radical possible break with Europe’s ideological past and its “feudal” system, including earlier interpretations of Christianity; on the contrary, the Reformation was simply the most confused and most primitive form of such a rupture.

One aspect of the Reformation was the work of the dominant classes, and led to the creation of national churches (Anglican or Lutheran) controlled by these classes. As such, these churches represented a compromise between the emerging bourgeoisie, the monarchy and the large landowners, through which they could hold at bay the threat posed by the poor and the peasantry. Effectively marginalising the Catholic idea of universality by establishing national Churches served in particular to reinforce the power of the monarchy, by strengthening its role as arbitrator between the forces of the old regime and those of the ascending bourgeoisie, and reinforcing those classes' nationalism, thus delaying the emergence of the new forms of universalism which would later be promoted by internationalist socialism. However, other aspects of the Reformation were driven by the lower classes, who were the main victims of the social transformations triggered by the birth of capitalism. These movements resorted to traditional forms of struggle, derived from the millenarist movements of the Middle Ages; as a result, far from leading the way, they were fated to lag behind the needs of their age. The dominated classes would have to wait until the French Revolution – with its secular popular and radical democratic forms of mobilisation – and the advent of socialism to find ways to effectively articulate their demands in relation to the new conditions in which they lived. The early modern protestant groups, by contrast, thrived on fundamentalist illusions, and this in turn encouraged the infinite replication of sects in thrall to the same kind of apocalyptic vision which is currently proliferating across the US.

The protestant sects who were forced to emigrate from 17th century England had developed a peculiar form of Christianity, distinct from both Catholic and Orthodox dogma. For that matter, their brand of Christianity was not even shared by the majority of European Protestants, including the Anglicans who made up the majority of the British ruling class. In general terms, we can say that the essential genius of the Reformation was to reclaim the Old Testament, which Catholicism and the Orthodox Church had marginalized when they defined Christianity as a break with Judaism. The Protestants restored Christianity to its place as Judaism's successor.

The particular form of Protestantism that found its way to New England continues to shape American ideology to this day. First, it facilitated the conquest of the new continent by grounding its legitimacy in scriptural reference (biblical Israel's violent conquest of the promised land is a constantly reiterated theme in North American discourse). Later, the US extended its god-given mission ("Manifest destiny") to encompass the entire globe. Thus North Americans have come to regard themselves as the "chosen people" - in practice, a synonym for the Nazi term, *Herrenvolk*. This is the threat which we are facing today. And this is why American imperialism (not "Empire") will be even more

brutal than its predecessors, most of whom never claimed to have been invested with a divine mission.

III

I am not among those who believe that the past can only be repeated. History transforms people. This is what has happened in Europe. Unfortunately however, American history, far from working to erase the horror of its origins, has instead reinforced that horror's hold and perpetuated its effects. This is true of both the American "Revolution", and the country's settlement through successive waves of migration.

Despite current attempts to promote its virtues, the "American Revolution" was only ever a limited war of independence, quite devoid of any social dimension. At no point in the course of their revolt against the British monarchy did the American settlers seek to transform economic and social relations – they simply refused to continue sharing the profits from them with the mother country's ruling class. They wanted power for themselves, not in order to change things, but in order to continue doing the same things – albeit with more determination and higher margins. Their primary objective was to pursue the settlement of the West, which implied - among other things - the genocide of the Native Americans. Likewise, the revolutionaries never challenged slavery. Indeed, most of the Revolution's great leaders were slave owners, and their prejudices on this subject proved unshakable.

The genocide of Native Americans was implicit in the logic of the new chosen people's divine mission. Their massacre cannot simply be blamed on the morals of an archaic and distant past. Right up until the 1960s, the act of genocide was proclaimed quite openly and proudly. Hollywood films pitted the "good" cowboy against the "evil" Native American, and this travesty of the past was central to the education of successive generations.

The same holds true for slavery. After independence, close to a century had to pass before slavery was abolished. And in contrast with the French Revolution's claims to the contrary, the fact of abolition, when it came, had nothing to do with morality – it only happened because slavery no longer served the cause of capitalist expansion. Thus, African Americans had to wait another century to be granted even minimal civil rights. And even then, the deep-rooted racism of the ruling class was hardly challenged at all. Up until the 1960s, lynching remained common place, providing a pretext for family picnics. Indeed, the practice of lynching persists today, more discretely and indirectly, in the form of a "justice" system that sends thousands of people to their deaths – most of them African

Americans, even though it is common knowledge that at least half of those condemned are innocent.

Successive waves of immigration have also helped strengthen the American ideology. Immigrants are certainly not responsible for the misery and oppression that caused their departure. They left their lands as victims. However, emigration also meant renouncing the collective struggle to change the conditions in their country of origin; they exchanged their suffering for the host country's ideology of individualism and "pulling oneself up by one's boot straps". This ideological shift also serves to delay the emergence of class-consciousness, which hardly has the time to develop before a new wave of immigrants arrives to help abort its political expression. Of course, migration also contributes to the "ethnic empowerment" of American society. The notion of "individual success" does not exclude the development of strong and supportive ethnic communities (Irish, or Italian, for example), without which individual isolation would become unbearable. Yet here again, the strengthening of ethnic identities is a process the American system cultivates only in order to recuperate, for it inevitably weakens class consciousness and active citizenship. Thus, while the people of Paris were getting ready to "assault heaven" (as the Communards put it in 1871), American cities provided the stage for a series of murderous wars between gangs formed by successive generations of poor immigrants (Irish, Italian, etc.) and cynically manipulated by the ruling class. In the US today, there is no workers' party, nor has there ever been one. The powerful workers' unions are apolitical, in every sense of the term. They have no links with a party that might share and express their concerns; nor have they ever been able to articulate a socialist vision of their own. Instead they subscribe, along with everyone else, to the dominant liberal ideology, which thus remains unchallenged. When they fight, it is on a limited and specific agenda that in no way calls liberalism into question. In this sense, they were and remain "post-modernist". Yet for the working class, communitarian beliefs cannot provide a substitute for socialist ideology. This is true even for African-Americans, the most radical community in the US; for the struggle of communitarian ideologies is, by definition, limited to the struggle against institutionalised racism.

One of the most neglected aspects of the differences between "European" ideologies (in their diversity) and the American ideology is the impact of the Enlightenment on their development. We know that the philosophy of the Enlightenment was the decisive event which launched the creation of modern European cultures and ideologies, and its impact remains considerable until this day, not only in the early centres of capitalist development, whether they be Catholic (France) or Protestant (England and the Netherlands), but also in Germany, and even Russia. Contrast this with the US, where the enlightenment

had only a marginal impact, engaging only an “aristocratic” (and pro-slavery) minority – that group which is embodied for posterity by Jefferson, Madison and a few others. In general, the sects of New England were untouched by the Enlightenment’s critical spirit, and their culture remained closer to the Witches of Salem than to the godless rationalism of the *Lumières*. The fruits of this refusal emerged as the Yankee bourgeoisie came of age. Out of New England, there emerged a simple and erroneous creed, which held that “Science” (that is, the hard sciences, such as physics) should determine the destiny of society -- an opinion that has been widely shared in the US for more than a century, not only among the ruling classes, but also by the people at large.

This substitution of science for enlightenment accounts for some of the salient traits of American ideology. It explains why philosophy is so unimportant, because it has been reduced to the most impoverished empiricism. It also accounts for the frantic effort to reduce the human and social sciences to “pure” (that is, “hard”) sciences: “pure” economics thus takes the place of political economy, and the science of “genes” replaces anthropology and sociology. This last unfortunate aberration provides another point of close contact between contemporary American ideology and Nazi ideology, which has doubtless been facilitated by the profound racism that runs through all American history. Another aberration stemming from this peculiar vision of science is a weakness for cosmological speculation (of which the “Big Bang” theory is the most well-known example). Among other things, the Enlightenment taught us that physics is the science of certain limited aspects of the universe which have been singled out as objects of research, not the science of the universe in its totality (which is a metaphysical, rather than a scientific concept). At this level, the American system of thought is closer to pre-modern attempts to reconcile faith and reason than to the modern scientific tradition. This regressive vision was perfectly suited to the purposes of the New England Protestant sectarians, and to the kind of pervasively religious society they produced.

As we know, it is this kind of regression which now threatens Europe.

IV

These two factors which shaped the historical formation of American society — a dominant biblical ideology and the absence of a workers’ party — combined to produce a wholly novel situation: a system run by a *de facto* single party, the party of capital. The two segments that make up this party share the same fundamental form of liberalism. Both of them address only the minority that participates in this type of truncated and impotent democracy (some 40 per cent of the electorate). Since the working class as a rule does not vote, each segment of the party has its own middle class clientele to which it has adjusted its

discourse. Both have carved out their own constituencies, composed of a number of capitalist interest segments (lobbies) and community support groups. American democracy today constitutes the advanced model of what I have called “low intensity democracy”. Its functioning is based on a total separation between the management of political life, through the practice of electoral democracy, and the management of economic life, which is governed by the laws of capital accumulation. Moreover, this separation is not subject to any form of radical challenge; it is part of what may be termed the general consensus. Yet it is this separation that effectively destroys the entire creative potential of political democracy. It castrates the representative institutions (parliaments and so forth), which are rendered impotent by their submission to the “market” and its dictates. In this sense, the choice between voting for the Democrats or the Republicans is ultimately futile, because what determines the American people’s future is not the outcome of their electoral choices, but the vagaries of the financial and other markets.

As a result, the American state exists exclusively to serve the economy (i.e. capital, which it obeys while entirely neglecting social questions). The state is able to function in this way for one main reason: because the historical process which formed American society blocked the development of the working classes’ political consciousness. Contrast this with the European state, which has been (and may become again) the obligatory forum in which the confrontation between social interest groups is played out. This is why the European state favours social compromises which invest democratic practices with real meaning. When the class struggle, and other political struggles, do not force the state to function in this way, when they cannot remain autonomous in the face of the exclusive logic of capital accumulation, then democracy becomes an entirely pointless exercise — as it is in the US.

The combination of a dominant religious practice — and its exploitation through fundamentalist discourse — with the absence of political consciousness among the oppressed classes gives the US political system an unprecedented margin of manoeuvre, through which it can destroy the potential impact of democratic practices and reduce them to benign rituals (politics as entertainment, the inauguration of political campaigns by cheerleaders, etc.).

However, we must not let ourselves be deluded. For it is not the fundamentalist ideology which occupies the command post and imposes its logic on the real holders of power: capital and its servants in government. It is capital, alone, which takes all the decisions, and only when it has done so does it then mobilise the American ideology to serve its cause. The means which are deployed — the unprecedented and systematic use of disinformation — can then serve their purpose, by isolating critics and subjecting them to a permanent and odious form

of blackmail. In this way, the establishment can easily manipulate “public opinion” by cultivating its stupidity.

Thanks to this context, the American ruling class has developed a kind of total cynicism, enveloped in an outer casing of hypocrisy which is perfectly transparent to foreign observers, but somehow invisible to the American people themselves. The regime is quite happy to resort to violence, even in its most extreme forms, whenever the need arises. All radical American activists know this only too well; the only options open to them are to sell out, or one day be killed.

Like all other ideologies, American ideology is menaced of becoming worn out. During periods of calm — marked by strong economic growth, accompanied by what pass for acceptable levels of social fallout — the ruling class’s pressure on its people naturally eases. Thus from time to time, the establishment has to reinvigorate that ideology using the classical methods: an enemy (always a foreigner, since American society has been decreed good by definition) is designated (the evil empire, the axis of evil), which will justify the mobilisation of all possible means in order to annihilate him. In the past this enemy was communism; McCarthyism (a phenomenon which has been forgotten by today’s “pro-Americans”) made possible the launching of the Cold War and the submission of Europe. Today, it is “terrorism”, which is clearly just a pretext, which is being made to serve the real project of the ruling class: the military control of the planet.

The avowed objective of America’s new hegemonic strategy is to prevent the emergence of any other power which might be capable of putting up resistance in the face of Washington’s injunctions. It is therefore necessary to dismantle countries which have become too “big”, so as to create a maximum number of satellites who are ready and willing to accept US bases for their “protection”. As its last three presidents (Bush senior, Clinton, and Bush junior) all agree, only one country has the right to be “big”, and that is the United States. In this sense, US hegemony ultimately depends on its disproportionate military power, rather than on any specific “advantages” of its economic system. Thanks to this power, the US can pose as the uncontested leader of the global mafia, whose “visible fist” will impose the new imperialist order on those who might otherwise be reluctant to fall into line.

Encouraged by their recent successes, the extreme right now has a tight hold on the reins of power in Washington. The choice on offer is clear: either accept US hegemony, along with the super-strength ‘liberalism’ it promotes, and which means little more than an exclusive obsession with making money — or reject both. In the first case, we will be giving Washington a free hand to “redesign”

the world in the image of Texas. Only by choosing the second option may we be able to do something to help rebuild a world that is essentially pluralist, democratic and peaceful.

Had they reacted in 1935 or 1937, the Europeans would have been able to halt the Nazi madness before it did so much harm. By delaying until 1939, they contributed to its tens of millions of victims. It is our responsibility to act now, so that Washington's neo-Nazi challenge may be contained and eliminated.