

Political Leadership and Social Transformation

David Fasenfest

Wayne State University, USA

Critical Sociology
38(6) 771–772
© The Author(s) 2012
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0896920512464607
crs.sagepub.com



We are in the midst of a national decision (some might argue it is a sham, others that the choices are only by degree and not of great substance) on who should be the next President of the United States. Debates on the left vacillate between arguments that it does not matter who is elected since the two parties in this country, Democrat and Republican, represent competing wings of the same ruling strata. Others argue that the differences, however subtle, matter on the margins determining which social policies are implemented and what sort of foreign policies are pursued. In this round of ‘is Obama a progressive’ debates several key issues keep coming up.

First, what would happen to the future of the Supreme Court in the coming years? Anyone paying even the slightest attention recognizes that rulings like *Citizens United* have dramatically altered electoral politics and the role of corporate interests in this latest campaign. Similarly, the recent decision to uphold what has become known as ‘Obamacare’ also had an important impact on society. In other similarly important decisions (or potential decisions) that the US Supreme Court may rule on – the definition of marriage, the legality of efforts to suppress voting, the rollback on reproductive rights and affirmative action legislation, the constitutionality of ‘personhood’ amendments and state laws – there are real concerns about how a conservative majority can fundamentally alter our socio-political landscape. Having control over nominations (we need not digress on the tortured politics of getting a nominee affirmed in the current Senate) is critical if we think this matters.

Second, what are the basic economic principles that inform the candidates for office? Clearly, Mitt Romney represents an attempt, financed by major corporate and right-wing backers, to alter the current accord on the role of government more generally and with regard the social safety net in particular. Doubling down on the bankrupt trickle-down policies and an affinity of an Ayan Rand form of extreme capitalism (where each person has an obligation to take care of oneself and society has no obligation to care for anyone) clearly stakes out a vision of society that will inflict great pain on the most needy. At the same time, while we might expect that another term for Barack Obama will avoid the worst of these consequences, it is not difficult to point out that on many levels his has not been a progressive administration but rather one pursuing a center-right agenda. It is the reality that politics in the US has been significantly redefined so that the spectrum has steadily shifted to the right, and the center of the 1960s has now become the hard left edge in this century.

We can discuss endlessly, and many do, about the pros and cons for supporting Obama, about whether or not we should cast our vote for a Green Party or Socialist candidate. We can lament the absence of a real workers’ party or a third party alternative (and countries with Socialist, Communist, Green, and Labor Parties represented in electoral politics do not ensure governments that pursue progressive social and economic agendas). We can even argue over whether or not participation in elections even matters. Lenin was clear that one of the key steps to seizing power when mass action is not an option is through bourgeois electoral politics. After all, there is a case to be made that over the past three decades, certainly with the election of Ronald Reagan and perhaps as far back as the election of Richard Nixon, the Right has been winning the propaganda campaign. How else can we explain why so many people believe unions (in this country representing only 13 percent of the workforce) have undue political influence and dominate the economy – and it does not take much thought to recognize that the most important unions today, in terms of the potential for political action, are in the public sector, all of which can help explain the recent assault on teacher, first responder, and other public employee unions at all levels.

At the same time, leadership does matter. Nixon, the Cold Warrior, was able to blunt Conservative opposition in his overtures and rapprochement with China. Clinton, as the head of a Democratic Party

seen as the defender of social services, was able to craft the end of welfare as a floor to protect those suffering from the inequities of a capitalist and racist society and turn it into a cudgel (the tragic irony is that rules that are now forcing poor people to go to work when there is no work to be found, are now denying benefits to those who did manage to find work but did not receive a living wage). Politics in the US took a significant turn with Clinton's administration by implicitly and explicitly adopting a Third Way approach to governing (Fudge and Williams, 2006) that solidified a neoliberal agenda, one that sought to return to a *laissez faire* economy (Konings, 2010), and destabilized the relationship between capital sectors (most notably finance capital) and economic and social institutions (Krier, 2009).

One of the many consequences of this change was the insertion into the global economy of political agency through neo-conservative elements in the US seeking to shape and facilitate a new hegemonic project of US economic domination (de Graaff and van Apeldoorn, 2011). As we have explored often in the pages of this journal, one of the regions which has been most active resisting and contesting this new hegemony has been Latin America. Cockcroft (2006) points out the new waves of social movements in the region have organized around recent efforts by US corporations to control the region's resources, leading to changing political leadership (see also Petras and Veltmeyer, 2006, as they discuss how mass mobilization influences electoral politics). National elites are recognizing that to save capitalism in their own country they must contest the wave of neoliberal changes being sought (de la Barra, 2010). And this resistance is not only national, but regional in scope. For example, increasing regional integration opposes US domination (Suárez Salazar, 2012), and even finance, the vehicle through which much of this neoliberal agenda is carried to other countries, has experienced a challenge with the emergence of new forms of regional financial capital through integration (Rosero and Erten, 2010).

Throughout, we see an Obama administration at work pursuing (consciously or otherwise) this neoliberal agenda both at home and internationally. Would it matter if this was being done by Mitt Romney, and therefore does it matter if we give Obama our vote (I ask rhetorically primarily for those on the left struggling to decide whether to vote for Obama). Another way of raising the question is to ask once again, how much influence does political leadership have on social transformation – especially if we argue that there are institutional, ideological, and political-economic forces at play that constrain the range of near-term policy options. In my view, it is important by degree because there are some administrative options available – in the US through executive order – that can move policies in one direction or another.

The articles in this issue of *Critical Sociology* tackle the question by exploring the impact of Lula da Silva's administration as he led Brazil on a path of increasing economic self-reliance by resisting most of the neoliberal agenda, and then by speculating on the opportunities and capabilities of his successor, Dilma Rousseff, as she charts a course for Brazilian society. Implicitly we can evaluate to what extent a change in political leadership can influence or alter social transformation, and draw lessons for change elsewhere.

References

- Cockcroft JD (2006) Imperialism, state and social movements in Latin America. *Critical Sociology* 32(1): 67–81.
- de Graaff N and van Apeldoorn B (2011) Varieties of US post-Cold War imperialism: anatomy of a failed hegemonic project and the future of US geopolitics. *Critical Sociology* 37(4): 403–427.
- de la Barra X (2010) Sacrificing neoliberalism to save capitalism: Latin America resists and offers answers to crises. *Critical Sociology* 36(5): 635–666.
- Fudge S and Williams S (2006) Beyond left and right: can the third way deliver a reinvigorated social democracy? *Critical Sociology* 32(4): 583–602.
- Konings M (2010) Neoliberalism and the American state. *Critical Sociology* 36(5): 741–765.
- Krier D (2009) Finance capital, neo-liberalism and critical institutionalism. *Critical Sociology* 35(3): 395–416.
- Petras J and Veltmeyer H (2006) Social movements and the state: political power dynamics in Latin America. *Critical Sociology* 32(1): 83–104.
- Rosero LD and Erten B (2010) Delinking through integration: a dependency analysis of regional financial integration. *Critical Sociology* 36(2): 221–242.
- Suárez Salazar L (2012) The current crisis of US domination over the Americas. *Critical Sociology* 38(2): 179–193.