



“Republicans And Democrats Are Wedded To Capitalism. Americans Deserve Better.”

Originally published in Huffington Post

The following discussion prompts were written by Professor Wolff to create a discussion based around his piece *“Republicans And Democrats are Wedded to Capitalism. Americans Deserve Better”* Please note, this article was written by Prof. Wolff on 01/03/2019. Keep the date in mind as it offers relevant historical context.

1. In what sense can one say that the US political system is undemocratic because of both major parties' celebration of capitalism?
2. Why is there no political party of significance that offers voters a chance to vote for a different, non-capitalist system?
3. Is the recent surge of "socialist" candidates within the Democratic Party likely to be able to change the traditional two-parties, one-economic-system structure of US politics?
4. Since growing inequality of income and wealth, economic instability (as in the 2008 crash), and unjust social policy (austerity after 2008, cutbacks in social services, etc.) are all products of capitalism, how do you explain the success with which the Republicans and Democrats have kept the issue of capitalism vs alternative systems out of mainstream US politics? Or is that the point and purpose of both parties in the US?
5. Is the frequently dismissive attitude toward "a third party" in the US justified? Is dismissal itself a part of what keeps a third party out of contention? What might generate and build a left third party in the US?

Republicans And Democrats Are Wedded To Capitalism. Americans Deserve Better.

Richard D. Wolff

01/03/2019

When college student Trevor Hill stood up at a CNN town hall in 2017 and asked House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) if her party might move further left to mark a starker break with right-wing economics, her answer was clear: "I thank you for your question but I have to say we're capitalist. And that's just the way it is."

No major Republican has felt a similar need to affirm loyalty to capitalism; everyone quite rightly assumes it. Yet the two major U.S. political parties' shared celebration of capitalism raises basic questions about U.S. society that deserve more attention than they get.

Capitalism's fundamental political problem is its class division between a small number of people who are employers and the majority who are employees.

Capitalism's cycles between good and bad times, as well as the inequality it produces through vast gaps in income and wealth, cause conflict and division. And these tensions threaten the whole system, as the recent "yellow jackets" mass movement in France demonstrates. There, a fuel tax rise sparked weeks of protest across the country as those who live beyond France's wealthy urban centers rejected — occasionally violently — yet another rise in their cost of living and demanded growing concessions from French capitalism.

In response, employers have built political alliances with some parts of the employee class. For example, inside the Republican Party, they worked long-standing deals with evangelicals to, for example, oppose abortion and coalesce around Supreme Court nominees, while inside the Democratic Party, they made alliances with large groups of religious and ethnic minorities.

They have had to make these and many more such political alliances because they are simply too vulnerable to go it alone. Their alliances' goals always included making sure that the capitalist system itself survived, partly by preventing the majority from voting for tax and regulation policies that would undo the inequalities and instabilities of capitalism.

Whichever party wins, it's capitalism that prevails.

Despite its socially destabilizing business cycles and income inequality, U.S. capitalism has been able to reproduce itself. This was achieved through the employer alliances constructed within both major political parties.

The aim of the Republicans is to identify and appeal directly to segments of the majority that feel aggrieved or threatened by certain social trends. In the U.S., this has meant appealing to, for example, white people facing the decline of white supremacist and racist practices; men seeing their dominance lessen over women at work and at home; and religious people facing the rise of secularism or disinterest in religion.

It's a gathering together of conservatives fearing the changes that are undermining old social positions and privileges. Its appeal is simple and clear. Vote for the GOP to have the government slow, stop or reverse those trends. The party always links that appeal to a rigid commitment to preserving and strengthening "the economy." By this they mean private property, markets and businesses where a dominant class of employers rules over employees.

The Democrats' mode of alliance is to appeal to the entire class of employees by endorsing state programs of mass economic, social and cultural support. For example through subsidized higher education, unemployment insurance, Social Security increases and so on. The Democrats' plan is to pay such programs' costs by means of taxes imposed partly on employers and partly on employees.

These state programs are pitched to employers as relatively inexpensive ways of preserving and strengthening a social solidarity that includes and so supports capitalism. The programs are pitched to employees as benefits flowing from the capitalist economy if and when they have voted to put the government in Democratic Party hands.

The Democrats have generally built alliances with those segments of the employee class who most need government support (those paid below median wage and salary levels) and with those who welcome those social trends such as secularism, urbanism, diverse sexuality and immigration that upset the people who the Republicans target for alliances. The so-called culture wars in the U.S. both reflect and reinforce the class alliances constructed inside the two parties.

Both parties push "partnership" between employers and employees as an essential goal, while accusing the other party of threatening or undermining that partnership. Both also get the bulk of their funding for pursuing these political goals from capitalist employers. Donations from employees make up a much smaller proportion of their funding.

Whichever party wins, it's capitalism that prevails. The statements and activities of the party in opposition serve to funnel disaffection with the party in power into votes for regime change. Capitalism is kept out of the debates, gets a critical pass and remains secure.

It also blocks possibilities for more than two parties. The GOP and Democratic Party have together produced and sustained the rules that make third parties difficult to start or maintain.

In many other capitalist countries, it was not possible to limit political parties to two. In France, Germany and beyond, while there are center-left and center-right parties similar to the Democratic and Republican parties in the U.S., there are also politically significant parties further to the right and left. In France, for example, the National Front is a powerful rightist party led by Marine Le Pen, while the La France Insoumise (“France unsubdued”) is a powerful leftist formation led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

In several European countries, green parties are also important. In Portugal and Luxembourg, green and anti-capitalist socialist parties are components of government coalitions. Democracy in all such countries reflects people’s demands for freedom to choose among parties with divergent attitudes toward capitalism. In contrast, the U.S. — the nation that most loudly and routinely proclaims its commitment to democracy — rigidly restricts its political parties to two that both celebrate capitalism.

Modern party politics has its contradictions. By its growing dependence on major donations from corporations, it risks exposing its class nature. Failures of major parties to solve key social problems increasingly provoke people to turn against the party system. Contemporary movements for social change are increasingly skeptical of allying with any existing political parties.

France’s “yellow jackets” movement — successful in defeating President Emmanuel Macron’s attempts to introduce taxes that disproportionately hit those least able to afford them — illustrates that skepticism perfectly.

Similarly, the entry of Elizabeth Warren into the 2020 presidential primaries — like Bernie Sanders’ effort in 2016 — moves in the direction of politically mobilizing the increasingly broad social disaffection with capitalism. Time will tell whether U.S. conditions make that direction sustainable within a changed Democratic Party or only outside it.

There is an emerging sense that new and very different parties are needed, parties that gather many segments of the employee class for a confrontation with all those who explicitly or implicitly accept and support capitalism.