

**American Democracy in Question:
A radical examination of the 2004 presidential election in the USA
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Fall 2007
(paper delivered at l'Université de Aix-Marseille in Spring 2006)**

It is a privilege to speak to a European audience about the American electoral system and to discuss the limitations of democracy in the United States today from a radical perspective. Since I began my teaching career in the French university system in the early 1970s I have always been impressed by the willingness of my French colleagues and students to learn from the mistakes of their American cousins. This interest can only encourage all of us “américanists” to read more deeply and search more widely for critical materials that might offer lessons on mistakes which need not be repeated.

In an essay entitled “Radical as Reality,” Alexander Cockburn, American journalist and co-editor of the radical magazine, *Counter Punch*, recounts a conversation between a young Romanian poet called Marcu and Vladimir Lenin, when he was still in exile in Zurich, prior to his return to Russia in 1917. This exchange, as recorded by Marcu, took place in a bohemian type restaurant frequented by political refugees. The poet turned to Lenin and asked:

How can you expect to foster hatred of this way, if you are not in principle against all wars? I thought as a Bolshevik you were really a radical thinker and refused to make any compromise with the idea of war. ... I see that we young people can only count on ourselves

Lenin hesitated, then drew his chair closer to the young man and replied:

Your determination to rely on yourselves is very important. Every man must rely on himself. Yet he should also listen to what informed people have to say. I don't know how radical you are, or how radical I am. I am certainly not radical enough. One can never be radical enough; that is, one must always try to be as radical as reality itself.(1)

Thus, in a single sentence, Lenin gave his most pithy definition of radicalism.

Indeed, finding the appropriate words and concepts which most closely correspond to reality is the great challenge facing American radicals today, and any attempt to provide a meaningful analysis of the 2004 presidential election in the USA must pass this test. It is always informative to follow public disagreements among radical intellectuals, and the controversy over the 2004 elections is no exception. It gave birth to an interesting debate among radical academics. Their efforts to come to terms with the historic significance of the Bush-Kerry electoral campaign of 2004 and the voting “irregularities” which assured, for the second time, a Republican presidential victory

offer us an opportunity to uncover dynamics which might otherwise have remained obscure.

Some of the disagreements between radical points of view on the 2004 presidential election have focused on scholarly essays written by Gabriel Kolko, Norman Solomon, Bertell Ollman, and Noam Chomsky, many of which have been published by the *Center for the Advanced Study of American Institutions and Social Movements* (CEIMSA) at Grenoble University on its University of California internet site : <http://dimension.ucsd.edu/CEIMSA-IN-EXILE/>.

The divergent viewpoints held by these four radical American intellectuals have drawn attention to political relationships and social class interests which had to overcome a series of obstacles in order to achieve their objectives. All four scholars agree that one of the major obstacles in the 2004 election was democracy. And all four also agree that this obstacle was successfully overcome to achieve the electoral victory of George W. Bush. There is disagreement, however, on the political significance of Kerry's loss, and there is also an important disagreement over the significance of the election fraud discoveries in swing-vote states, such as Ohio.

Before discussing the disagreements among these four radical American scholars, I would like to briefly remind European readers of the uniquely American context of the recent presidential elections: in a world population of more than 6 billion, there are almost 300 million U.S. citizens; of these 300 million Americans (of whom 21% are less than 15 years old) about 2/3 are eligible to vote, but barely over 1/2 of these eligible voters (perhaps 106 million) actually voted in the elections of 2000, and a slightly larger number (no more than 120 million) voted in the 2004 elections. (These numbers are, of course, only rough estimates.)

The United States, today, is divided into 435 congressional districts, each district electing a representative to the U.S. House of Representatives every two years, and mobilizing for a presidential election every four years. The congressional districts are created proportionally, according to population size. In this system of proportional representation, the total U.S. population divided by the number of congressional districts, gives the approximate population of each district, e.g. roughly 600,000 U.S. citizens. (California, with a population of 35 million is thus divided into 53 districts, while Oklahoma, with a population of 3.5 million, has only five congressional districts.) But, if the demographic size of a congressional district is pre-determined far in advance, the actual borders are not. Over the past several years, with Republican political hegemony in Washington, D.C., congressional districts have been *redrawn* with the aim of guaranteeing Republican majorities. By drawing new congressional district lines which divide local neighborhoods that traditionally vote for Democratic Party candidates, congressional districts are literally reshaped to reduce the percentage of Democrats so that they contain a new majority of Republicans. (The term for this practice, which dates from the early 19th century is "gerrymandering", after Massachusetts governor Elbridge Gerry who was the first to reapportion his state senatorial districts in order to produce a majority in each district that supported his political party in the state elections.) This strategy of reshaping districts has been employed periodically by both parties while in power, for nearly 200 years, to reinforce their hegemony of political power.(2)

Months before the presidential elections, congressional districts prepare for what is called the "primary elections", and in these summer months, preceding the November elections, the local electorate are mobilized with the hope of placing their bets on "a winning horse" (a presidential candidate who has a chance of winning the national election). For historic reasons the selection of this early nominee is usually a binary choice: campaign financing assures that those of who actually do go to the trouble to vote are often motivated negatively; namely, to support "the lesser evil": the pragmatic concern of voters to select "a possible winner" thus limits them to choosing between two representatives of *the same social class interests*.

The "realistic" choice, for example, in the 2004 election was between Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, whose family fortune is estimated at around \$900 million, and George W. Bush, whose private fortune is worth some \$21 million. Not only do Bush and Kerry represent the same social class interests, but by virtue of the fact that Kerry is about 50 times richer than Bush, the former was the bigger winner in latter's successful first term strategy to reduce taxes for the rich and eliminate the inheritance tax. John Kerry, like Bill Gates and other super rich families in America, was Bush's electoral "base", the constituency he aimed to please. Bush the bulldog, made Kerry the billionaire a much richer man and, in addition, has presented him with a whole new line of guaranteed investments for future profits in government contracts.

In most U.S. elections, being "realistic" and voting for a "possible winner" and/or "the lesser evil" places severe limitations on the democratic process. Few candidates have an interest in awakening social class interests which might eventually become antagonistic to their own interests, and since candidates usually belong to the same social class (i.e. similar university education, professional training, and business experiences), there is necessarily a complicity concerning the public projection of their "political differences," for they rationally share many of the same social class interests. In the recent presidential election campaign we witnessed a variety of *single issues*, like "gay marriages", "limited abortion rights", "improved medical insurance programs" which received much media coverage, along with the color of neckties, skin textures, and family intimacies. But to discuss fundamental relationships, like *property rights* and *corporate income taxes*, and systemic problems in American society –problems like *institutional racism*, *unemployment*, *homelessness*, *the working poor*, *growing inequalities*, and *environmental degradation*, etc.-- this discourse during an American presidential campaign was *absolutely taboo*. (Look at what happened to Vermont's governor Howard Dean, a populist presidential candidate until he got *off tract* and spoke too far beyond his own social class interests and those of the Democratic Party! After speaking passionately about the rights of homeless people at a televised campaign rally, he was simply shunted by the media and abandoned by the Party elite.)

The limitations of *electoral democracy* seem obvious to an ever increasing number of people in the U.S. Another more radical form of democracy, sometimes called *industrial democracy*, invites closer participation than simply periodic elections, for better or for worse. These two forms of democracy are not mutually exclusive. In local institutions which largely govern our lives, egalitarian organization and free speech would challenge authoritarian management techniques and necessarily modify the priorities of institutional policies as they now exist in capitalist America. Such a

confrontation in institutions like factories, offices, businesses, in neighborhood schools and churches, etc., where economic and political sanctions often await any non-conformist who dares to dispute policy decisions, would inevitably meet with resistance of different types. Overcoming authoritarian management at the local level, and taking collective control of local institutions –both public and private- which have so much influence on the way we live, is the true challenge facing us in this period of economic and political crisis.

In this perspective, the defeat of Kerry by Bush is not the stuff of tragedy for any radical scholar. The stresses and strains on the American political system are beyond the pale of remedies that can be offered by individual leaders and *single-issue* reformers. It would appear that many radical scholars, including Professors Kolko, Ollman, Chomsky, and Norman Solomon, think that a social movement is in the making in America, but that on these uncharted waters the magnitude, the momentum, and even the velocity is unknowable. They each see quantitative changes, and they wait for a qualitative leap --but when, where, and how remain to be seen.

Do the limited democratic traditions of America's past represent the seeds of future forms of democracy, which might guarantee more egalitarian and just relationships within our communities and social institutions? In his book, Parecon: Life After Capitalism, Michael Albert suggests a theory of what might happen in America if forces were liberated to nurture these existing seeds of democracy and to raise democratic participation to higher levels, rather than allow it to be destroyed entirely by authoritarian modes of management which are embracing the newly militarized political economy.

It is precisely on this point that debates have occurred in the recent writings of radical American scholars.

Speaking of the 2004 election campaign (before the November election), Gabriel Kolko offered a caveat first published in the political magazine, *Counter Punch*: ***The victory of George W. Bush for a second term would be more beneficial to the supporters of peace than the election of John Kerry.*** If Kerry won the presidency in November, Kolko argued, U.S. foreign policy would adopt new diplomatic tactics which would eventually strengthen the U.S. aim at achieving hegemony in the oil-rich areas of the world. Under Kerry's leadership, according to Kolko, U.S. imperialist objectives would benefit from wider international support by capitalist countries. The political skills of Kerry, compared to the bald *rapprochement* employed by the Bush administration, would be far more sophisticated and therefore constitute a far more dangerous threat for Third World countries and ultimately for mankind, concluded Kolko. According to this radical viewpoint, *The New American Century* is a bipartisan project and its effect on societies around the world are not benign.(3)

Kolko's analysis came under immediate attack by other radical scholars who at the same time were critical of Independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader. Norman Solomon contested in an article for *Z Magazine* in September 2005 that a Bush victory would be a betrayal of homosexuals, feminists, and large numbers of poor people for whom neo-liberal reforms represent a grave danger. Furthermore, questioned Solomon, who can be sure that Bush's unilateral militarism will really "self-destruct" and terminate the American imperial apparatus along with it? Turning

to lessons from history, Solomon pointed out that the German Communist Party at the time of the Weimar Republic had suffered similar delusions by tolerating the rise of Fascism because they believed it was an irrational and temporary phenomenon. ("After Hitler, Communism!" was their hopeful slogan.) History proved them wrong.

In brief, the radical critique of Kolko's radical criticism was that the gamble was too great; there was simply no plausible justification to oppose Kerry over Bush. A Bush victory would have a devastating effect on the lives of too many progressive allies, and Kerry was "the lesser evil," Solomon concluded that he must be supported in a show of solidarity for those whom Bush would destroy, (i.e. young women in need of abortions, gays wishing to live normal lives, poor people in need of jobs, education and health care, critical intellectuals who are increasingly subject to state censorship, institutional harassment, etc., etc....) (4)

A third radical view of the 2004 presidential election was presented by Noam Chomsky written after the elections had taken place. Chomsky discussed the significance of the Bush victory. Voting patterns resembled the 2000 election, Chomsky observed, with Republicans carrying virtually the same states: "A small change in voter preference would have put Kerry in the White House." Chomsky was much more concerned with public opinion than with voter behavior. He argued that the results of public opinion polls in America are "kept under wraps by the doctrinal institutions" because they are profoundly subversive and reveal strong democratic urges and egalitarian aspirations among a large sector of the American population. The results of "highly informative studies" of public opinion released right before the election, by the *Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR)* and the *Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland (PIPA)* are offered as proof that a radical discontent exists among a large number of Americans, comparable to the public opinion in Spain which brought down the government in the March 2004 elections. The difference being that in Spain the issue came to a vote, while in America public opinion is successfully managed out of the political arena by public relations firms.

As usual, the electoral campaigns were run by the PR industry, which in its regular vocation sells toothpaste, life-style drugs, automobiles, and other commodities. Its guiding principle is deceit. Its task is to undermine the 'free markets' we are taught to revere: mythical entities in which informed consumers make rational choices.

When assigned the task of selling candidates, the PR industry naturally resorts to the same fundamental techniques, so as to ensure that politics remains 'the shadow cast by big business over society,' as America's leading social philosopher, John Dewey, described the results of 'industrial feudalism' long ago. Deceit is employed to undermine democracy, just as it is the natural device to undermine markets.(5)

In 2000, *issue awareness* (i.e. the voters' knowledge of a candidate's position on key issues) reached an all-time low. Evidence suggests that it may have been even lower in 2004.

On the other hand, opinion polls on the eve of the 2000 elections show that about 75% of the electorate regarded it as a game played by rich contributors, party managers, and public relations firms, which train candidates to project images and produce meaningless phrases that might win some votes. This is very likely the reason why "the population paid little attention to the *stolen election* that greatly exorcised educated sectors." And it is why they are likely to pay little attention to campaigns about alleged fraud in 2004.(6)

Chomsky concludes that public opinion polls reveal that "there are substantial opportunities for educating and organizing [a democratic movement in the U.S.], including the development of potential electoral alternatives," but history shows that rights will not be given by benevolent authorities, nor will they be won by "intermittent actions –a few large demonstrations after which we go home." Real democracy can be gained only with a sustained effort, on a daily basis, in the political arena and in the economic arena as well, where a "functioning democratic culture plays some role in determining policies."(7)

Ollman begins his critique of Chomsky's critical critique of the 2004 elections by observing that any doubt in the anti-Bush camp that this election was stolen is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the theft, which is more like stacking a deck of cards than robbing a bank vault. The relevant question which has not been asked by the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, and the *Village Voice* is : ***Was there a deliberate lack of transparency to ensure that the same party won every time?***(8)

While Bertell Ollman shares much of Chomsky's views, their differences are instructive. Ollman concedes that the American population is more radical than its political leadership, and also that "most people are broadly aware that the elections are not serious affairs and therefore do not take them very seriously."(9) He also agrees that the leadership has won its position in politics largely by opportunism and deceit, organized by the PR industry, and that large corporations determine almost all important policies in government today. Where they differ, however, is on the question of historical consciousness. Chomsky believes the electoral politics are a "done deal", with pre-determined results guaranteed by severely limited choices, Ollman disagrees and forcefully argues that to totally ignore the choices that elections represent, as limited as the differences are, is to miss an opportunity to educate the masses and strengthen resistance to the plutocracy which rules the United States today. The right to vote, he asserts, as limited and as distorted as it is in this country, "was won by over 200 years of popular struggle and marks an important advance over what existed before."(10)

Chomsky's view that the left should simply ignore the stolen election since the outcome made very little difference is rejected by Ollman, who thinks that the largely repressed anger over this injustice is "the matrix for political organizing." Chomsky argues just the opposite: that most of Bush's victims know that neither the Republican

nor the Democratic Party represents their interests and that apart from a small group, which he calls the “educated sector,” the American people showed massive indifference to the event. Ollman asserts that this observation must be examined in greater depth: a) the American intelligencia, essentially represented by the media, have largely dismissed or trivialized the “irregularities” of the 2004 election. And b) the media’s influence on the short-term thinking of the population might very well explain the initial public indifference to the fraud.

A lot that appears like indifference ... is really the other side of a frustration that comes from a media-imposed uncertainty regarding what happened and not knowing what to do about it.(11)

The *stolen election*, Ollman concluded, is “an American tsunami whose waves have not only ruined millions of ballots but pulled off a corner on the operations of a social and economic system that is inherently biased and unjust.” While the lack of *real democracy* in the United States must remain a central concern, election fraud must not be ignored by radical intellectuals, for what happened in America on election day is only a few steps from the *gestalt* of understanding all the rottenness that Chomsky so relentlessly and thoroughly exposes in his political writings. This sort of careful and honest critique -a politics of delegitimation that seeks to undermine whatever’s left of people’s faith in American elections- is the only path toward building a true democracy in America.(12)

By way of conclusion.

Several decades ago, in a moment of candor, the moderate Democrat, Thomas ‘Tip’ O’Neil, who served for 34 years as a Massachusetts representative in the U.S. House of Representatives (from 1953 to 1987) and who was Speaker of the House from 1977 until 1987, told reporters that in any other country the Democrats would be five parties. There are still a few who believe in “America’s oldest party,” but most liberals, academics, and social activists are not among them. They long ago abandoned their faith in the Democratic Party leadership, as a progressive political force in the nation, and for decades now they have simply supported it as *The Lesser Evil*.(13)

Over the ensuing years, events seem to have vindicated Tip O’Neil’s observation, that, indeed, there is no politically distinct entity as the Democratic Party in the United States. Instead, people who continue to register as Democrats constitute an admixture of political tendencies and ideologies with no set of values or shared principles to orient their actions, other than a vague anti-Republican Party bias. On the fundamental political question of *private property rights*, both Republicans and Democrats seem to have reached a consensus : *This principle is never again to be challenged publicly.*

I am registered to vote in Oakland, California, which is the 9th Congressional District in California (one of the fifty-three districts in that state). More than 170,000 of us voted in this last election. Oakland is one of the most class-conscious places on the planet, and our U.S. Representative in Congress, Ms. Barbara Lee, represents the class interests of her constituents, just as President Bush does his --only the social class

interests she represents are different than those which Bush so loyally represents! Lee was the only voice in Congress to vote against the authorization for President Bush to make war on Afghanistan, immediately after 9/11. A brave single voice that represented the interests of her constituency, she continues to be re-elected in the 9th District, again and again.

The radical political tradition in the United States represents an obstacle to what C. Wright Mills called “the power elite,” and radicals must be marginalized if this elite is to successfully protect the privilege and power to which it has become accustomed. The fact is that this tradition cannot be completely eliminated, and the debates within the radical milieu are highly instructive. So far no large political machine has been erected in America to control the left by the cooptation of a few key “leaders,” and the political culture appears to be chaotic. But when examined closely, I believe we can identify a “sifting-and-winnowing” process, an authentic democratic activity in the form of informal discussions and debates, where the basic premises are clearly and honestly defined. This is only possible when there is an ambiance of intellectual tolerance, and the opposition has an opportunity to speak. These locations can be discovered across the landscape of North America, but you will find no map published by *Times Warner*, or advertised on *CNN* to take you there.

NOTES

1. Cited by Alexander Cockburn in his essay, “Radical as Reality,” in Robin Blackburn ed. *After the Fall, The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism* (London: Verso Press, 1991) pp.166-167.

2. Constance Borde, et al., *Focus on American Democracy, le système politique en version originale* (Paris: Presse de Sciences Po, 1996).

3. Gabriel Kolko, “The US Must be Isolated and Constrained (The Coming Elections and the Future of American Global Power),” published 4 November 2004 on the CEIMSA internet site at: <http://dimension.ucsd.edu/~flonidier/newsletter/newsletter-04-11-04.html>.

4. Normon Solomon, “Nader's Game of Chicken,” published 31 October 2004 <http://www.zmag.org/Zbios.htm>. See also the radical critique of the 2004 elections on the ZNet site: http://www.zmag.org/Third_.htm.

5. Noam Chomsky, “Elections/Public 2004,” published 30 November 2004, <http://dimension.ucsd.edu/~flonidier/archives/bull-156.html>.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Bertell Ollman, "What Constitutes a 'Stolen Election'?", published 29 November 2004, http://www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/docs/stolen_election2.php.
9. Ollman, "Should the Left Ignore the 'Stolen Election'?" published 1 January 2005, http://www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/docs/stolen_election2.php.
10. Ollman, "What Constitutes a 'Stolen Election'?", op.cit.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Lenni Brenner, *The Lesser Evil, The Democratic Party* (New York: Lyle Stuart, Inc., 1988), p.v.