The Dominant Critique: Empty Politics of Many Progressives

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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In "How to Get Our Democracy Back" Lawrence Lessig wrote in The Nation, Feb. 3 (and soon after in the San Francisco Chronicle), a somewhat scathing indictment of Congress and the President.

In my soon to be released book, Petrocollapse: The Basis of Crash and Culture Change, part of it discusses the political and socioeconomic system we live under. A section of that part goes into what I call the Dominant Critique. Those commentators or leaders participating in it constitute what has come to mean the "Left." Although, any critic of big business and the never-ending war footing of the nation -- or even a liberal Democrat -- is called "Left."

"Left"is often used disparagingly by Republicans who may have forgotten that a real leftist meant a Marxist of some stripe. "Left" is also used to deride actual "leftists" by those who have woken up to ecological and energy reality. These latter folk saw that conventional politics were missing the boat. It isn't that environmentalists don't see merit in socialism or communism (small, not upper case "C"). Environmentalists are often "leftists" and usually support unionism, cooperatives, and workers keeping the value of their labor. The term "Watermelon" often applies: "green on the outside, red on the inside." However, they are also green on the inside. (Red used to only refer to leftists; now it often refers to Republican-voting states colored that way by television news teams for electronic maps.)

Be that as it may, "There's no social justice on a dead planet" -- as Earth First!ers are fond of pointing out. The problem with social justice activists, liberals and leftists is that they often don't understand or support the need for direct action to defend nature, and they don't understand peak oil or the reasons why collapse of the economy (and ecosystem) is ahead. I have heard leftists try to refute peak oil as an industry scam.

But there are some savvy progressive or leftist commentators and leaders who do understand that we have a problem with the climate, and that resource limits are real -- as real as the injustices of casino capitalism and wars for oil. Even many of these commentators and leaders pull their punches or buy into a Democratic Party-like critique of the nation's problems. This kind of critique makes for an opposition that mainly objects to extra-high Wall Street profits, while supporting kinder federal spending.

Since there's not much of an anti-war movement, at this writing in the winter of our 2010 discontent, criticism of the government and the big corporations is basically limited to demanding more employment stimulus. Are jobs really the answer? Aren't jobs for the most part "working for The Man"? We will not now go into alternative social structures and cultures, when many Culture Change articles have done so.

In addition to greater employment -- resulting in ecologically harmful economic growth -- there are many issues that liberal/left/progressive journalists and activists address, and rightly so. But overall the Dominant Critique does not question or reject the system or foresee its collapse. Advocating a no-car lifestyle and starving the global-warming corporations, for example, is beyond the Dominant Critique's party line -- but is not left or right.

A great example of the Dominant Critique is The Nation magazine, but the mindset can also be found anywhere in the media where the party line is not Republicanism or party-line Democratism. Savor Lessig's article and then my commentary. Both are from the Energy Bulletin of Feb. 10.

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How to Get Our Democracy Back

Lawrence Lessig, The Nation

We should remember what it felt like one year ago, as the ability to recall it emotionally will pass and it is an emotional memory as much as anything else. It was a moment rare in a democracy's history. The feeling was palpable--to supporters and opponents alike--that something important had happened. America had elected, the young candidate promised, a transformational president. And wrapped in a campaign that had produced the biggest influx of new voters and small-dollar contributions in a generation, the claim seemed credible, almost intoxicating, and just in time.

Yet a year into the presidency of Barack Obama, it is already clear that this administration is an opportunity missed. Not because it is too conservative. Not because it is too liberal. But because it is too conventional. Obama has given up the rhetoric of his early campaign--a campaign that promised to "challenge the broken system in Washington" and to "fundamentally change the way Washington works." Indeed, "fundamental change" is no longer even a hint.

Instead, we are now seeing the consequences of a decision made at the most vulnerable point of Obama's campaign--just when it seemed that he might really have beaten the party's presumed nominee. For at that moment, Obama handed the architecture of his new administration over to a team that thought what America needed most was another Bill Clinton. A team chosen by the brother of one of DC's most powerful lobbyists, and a White House headed by the quintessential DC politician. A team that could envision nothing more than the ordinary politics of Washington--the kind of politics Obama had called "small." A team whose imagination--politically--is tiny.

...This administration has not "taken up that fight." Instead, it has stepped down from the high ground the president occupied on January 20, 2009, and played a political game no different from the one George W. Bush played, or Bill Clinton before him. Obama has accepted the

power of the "defenders of the status quo" and simply negotiated with them. "Audacity" fits nothing on the list of last year's activity, save the suggestion that this is the administration the candidate had promised.

Maybe this was his plan all along. It was not what he said. And by ignoring what he promised, and by doing what he attacked ("too many times, after the election is over, and the confetti is swept away, all those promises fade from memory, and the lobbyists and the special interests move in"), Obama will leave the presidency, whether in 2013 or 2017, with Washington essentially intact and the movement he inspired betrayed.

That movement needs new leadership. On the right (the tea party) and the left (MoveOn and Bold Progressives), there is an unstoppable recognition that our government has failed. But both sides need to understand the source of its failure if either or, better, both together, are to respond.

At the center of our government lies a bankrupt institution: Congress. Not financially bankrupt, at least not yet, but politically bankrupt. Bush v. Gore notwithstanding, Americans' faith in the Supreme Court remains extraordinarily high--76 percent have a fair or great deal of "trust and confidence" in the Court. Their faith in the presidency is also high--61 percent...

EB contributor Jan Lundberg writes:

While there's much truth in Lawrence Lessig's article, what he leaves out is the controlling part of the big-picture equation. He does not understand petroleum or how it will fail us and cause petrocollapse. Without petroleum in unlimited supply for food production, distribution, preservation and preparation, what do you think will result when there is a major oil crunch or crop failures, and food riots hit?

This can be triggered by a significant shortage in this age of peak oil, most likely from a geopolitical event. What will happen to businesses and the work force if commuting and trucking are stopped from lack of fuel for more than a couple of days? These questions are kept out of both corporate news media and the progressive press. Likewise, preparations for a transformation to a more localized, sustainable lifestyle are suppressed or occasionally given green lip service. It's as if the Obamas' organic White House food garden constituted a change in the way people were fed and treated the land.

The other blind spot in Lessig's limited political analysis is that he fails to see what the dominant culture's role is in North Americans' behavior. The scum rises to the top, so the aspiring and current

members of Congress will take money any way they can to serve their corporate masters or other funders. It's not just a small class of greedy people ruining a country but rather a materialistic culture that believes in private gain and property over the needs of the community. Nature is something to milk until she's dry. So now we reap the whirlwind of climate change, loss of biodiversity, soil erosion and food security.

As long as people think they can shop for what they need, and give their time and labor over to a boss or corporation, they will just be following the Wall Street elite and its Congressional friends down the slippery slope of petrocollapse and climate extinction.

A symptom of a greater problem should not command all our attention. An example is the problem with Priuses. Please enjoy the cartoon on our recent story "Stuck Accelerators: Toyotas and the Fossil-Fuel Growth Economy."

Was "our democracy" ever ours? Exactly where does Lessig want us to get back to?

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