

THE SILENCED MAJORITY

Can America still afford democracy?

By Rana Dasgupta



Concern about American democracy is often expressed as a parable of the Thirties: *We must prevent another Hitler*. The word “fascism” has appeared frequently in denunciations of Donald Trump; many have accused him of a führer-like contempt for the American system. But it is time to ask whether the system itself is not thereby too conveniently excused. Mass political participation has come only recently and reluctantly to America; voter suppression is the more traditional American way. And for reasons that have nothing to do with fascism, even that partial efflorescence may be coming to an end. Trump’s baleful theatrics have distracted us, in fact, from the broader disintegration of the twentieth-century interregnum, of which he is only a symptom. That process has much further to go, and will produce dangers greater than he.

Hitler’s moment differed vastly from our own: with total industrialization, the Western working masses manufactured the world’s most valuable products, and were essential to global economic growth. The defeat of Great Power fascism established democracy as the dominant political technology in the capitalist world and relegated totalitarian economic organization to the other side of the Iron Curtain. Western democracy then flourished during the postwar era of fast-growing national economies, when Western populations were much wealthier than those of other countries. But these conditions have changed. One of the most significant processes of our own moment is the re-exclusion of the Western masses from the center of world affairs—a position they occupied for less than two centuries. And while the economic aspects of this development are much discussed (the demise,

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not only of public subsidies, but, most importantly for the Western psyche, of salaries greatly inflated compared with those of the rest of the world), the resultant political unwinding will be even more traumatic.

Democracy—in its twentieth-century Western guise—is not compatible with just any economic arrangement. Eighteenth-century Europe could neither afford nor tolerate it, and democratic talk was sternly forbidden. A delicate and unusual set of circumstances brought democratic change. But those circumstances did not occur much outside the West. And now they are disappearing here too.

Instead of seeking lessons from twentieth-century Germany, we should look back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the Anglo-American complex. That will remind us that most of the phenomena we label fascist—nationalist fictions of ethnic supremacy, mass

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disfranchisement, censorship—are fully compatible with free-market capitalism.

In the seventeenth century, England was an emerging superpower. Supremacy would come from its invention of a *world principle of property*. This principle was developed following contact with the Americas, where it became possible to conjure vast new English properties “out of nothing”—in a way that was impracticable, for instance, in the militarized, mercantile societies of India. Such properties were created by a legal definition of ownership designed so that it could be applied only to the invaders. “As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of,” John Locke wrote in 1689, “so much is his property.” When combined with other new legal categories such as “the savage” and “the state of nature,” this principle of property engendered societies such as Carolina, where Locke’s patron, the first earl of Shaftesbury, was a lord proprietor.

Shaftesbury was an aggressive investor, with shareholdings in the Royal Africa Company, the East India Company, and the Hudson’s Bay Company, and he owned a slave ship and a plantation in Barbados. In Carolina, he set about creating a “traditional and virtuous English society” consisting of “balanced government, societal harmony, sustainable prosperity, impartial justice, and religious tolerance.” In-

tended as a utopia, this society was worked by indentured servants and transported slaves: Africans were for a long time the largest social group. “Freedom” was the slogan, but it applied only to some; the purpose of government was to protect property, not people.

Carolina was, in this sense, a more “advanced” version of Shaftesbury’s own England. Ancient custom held much of English land under common ownership, but according to the emerging Whig ideology of England’s seventeenth-century business elite, there was no such thing: property was by definition private. Accordingly, the English state had begun to sponsor a violent process of colonization at home too. With the enclosure acts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Britain’s common land was consolidated into private estates, overturning ancient rights of grazing and cultivation.

This shift produced a stream of peasant refugees, who could then be pressed into the further service of property. Many rural women became property themselves, as William Hogarth showed in his dismal series of engravings, *A Harlot’s Progress*. Some were employed to stand in the doorways of “crimping houses,” where they would lure men into a flirtatious drinking game, after which the naïve victims would awake on a ship to the Caribbean. During the eighteenth century, perhaps a quarter of a million British men were forcibly sent overseas to serve the cause of property; disease killed even more than piracy or war. Back at home, meanwhile, the poor were brutally punished for the slightest affront to property: thieves could be whipped, burned, or hanged for stealing shirts, coats, or pewter spoons, respectively.

Obviously, such a system could take no account of the general opinion, and the right to vote and hold political office was restricted to men with property. All women and 90 percent of men were therefore excluded. Democratic conspiracy, meanwhile—which always had two interdependent causes: the expansion of suffrage, and the organization of workers—could be punished with exile to the penal colonies. Such repression became more severe over the course of the eighteenth century, which roiled with antiestablishment riots. The dictatorship of property endured: after the execution of Charles I, there was no significant democratic advance for nearly two centuries.

From their pitiless opposition to the will of the people, we might imagine that British elites were dogmatic and reactionary. (Period dramas depicting stuck-up aristocrats scandalized by eccentricity and innovation flatter this version of history.) The truth is that they were open-minded radicals. They had no sentimentality about the political order, cutting the head off one king and sending another into exile. They could invent financial and legal structures (such

as the Bank of England, founded in 1694) capable of releasing unprecedented market energies. Even their decision to exploit American land with African labor demonstrated their world-bending pursuit of wealth. Their mines and plantations would eventually supply the capital for the first industrial revolution. They loved fashion and technology, they believed in rationality, progress, and transparency. They were the “founding fathers” of our modern world.

And yet they presided over a political system as brutal as it was exclusive. Why? The answer is simple. They could not afford democracy, but also, crucially, *they did not need it*.

Eighteenth-century Britain had two economies. The first was that of domestic production. Agriculture supplied a living for most of the population, three quarters of which was dispersed, on the eve of the Industrial Revolution, across thousands of rural communities. Most urban workers also derived their income from agriculture: food, textiles, and leather made up three quarters of British manufacturing. Commerce and transport constituted 40 percent of the service sector; most of the rest consisted of real estate rental and domestic services. From 1700 to 1780, this economy grew between a half a percent and 1 percent per year; beginning in 1780, it approached 2 percent.

The second economy was fueled by Britain’s industrial and imperial expansion. This was largely financialized: investors participated by trading debt, company shares, and commodities on the London exchange. Some investments were domestic, but the most fantastic gains derived from new schemes to privatize the globe. The great majority of British investment capital was bound up in overseas trading monopolies, which used it to occupy territory and turn anything that could be considered an asset (land, industry, tax revenue, luxury goods, human beings) into corporate property. Shares in the East India Company could yield returns of 30 percent or more per year, and Jamaican sugar plantations rapidly produced some of the world’s largest fortunes. The scale of the second economy was so

enormous—by the end of the eighteenth century, the East India Company alone generated some 15 percent of British GDP—that it could not remain merely a commercial space. These trading monopolies remade the British state in their own image, forcing it to expand in order to secure their worldwide interests. They transformed politics too—not only for British people, but for everyone.

Two aspects of these trading monopolies are crucial here. First, they served elites almost exclusively. Shareholders in the East India Company numbered fewer than two thousand; there were around two hundred shareholders in the Royal African Company, which controlled the West African trade in gold, silver, timber, and human beings. These were Britain’s landowners and bureaucrats, the same people

who controlled the fundamentals of the first economy. The British masses did not possess the capital necessary to invest, nor did they have access to the relevant information networks. (Parliament was the most important of these, which is one reason that buying a seat in the House of Commons was such a worthwhile investment.) Second, the trading monopolies made the growth of elite fortunes eerily independent of the British population at large. British workers contributed little to their

revenues. A regular supply of maritime and military men was required, to be sure, but their numbers were negligible compared with the profits, and their condition was close to slavery: when they survived, they were often kept from desertion by the constant deferment of payment.

It should be clear why this system endured. The general population was dispersed, victimized, and politically disorganized. Since the oligarchy derived its wealth from outside the country, moreover, it had only limited interest in the political satisfaction of the British masses, and could use aggressive penal measures to keep them in check.

The supremacy of property was disrupted, from the 1780s onward, by the rise of a competing *world principle of labor*. The most stupendous product of the Industrial Revolution



was the working class itself. Working people were organized into futuristic battalions, and their unprecedented productive power became the central driver of the global economy. They were also forced, from the outset, into political activism—for while agriculturalists, in difficult times, might wheedle some extra bounty from nature, factory workers relied solely on their wages, and every additional penny had to be wrested from owners' profits. The Combination Act of 1799 attempted to prevent collective bargaining, but was ultimately unsuccessful. Labor became politically formidable, and property lost its stranglehold. The first significant electoral expansion was enacted in 1832: "to prevent," in the words of the prime minister, "the necessity of revolution."

But conflict was endemic. Ordinary people had known the state's most savage cruelty, and its self-preserving entreaties rang hollow. Well into the twentieth century, many believed the only lasting cure for the state's partiality to property owners was proletarian revolution: workers must take over the state apparatus and divert its purpose from that of property protection. In fear of such a prospect, governments made further concessions—it was just after the Bolshevik Revolution that Britain lifted most of its last restrictions on adult suffrage—but this only moved class war into the democratic arena. Over the course of the twentieth century, left-wing politicians and labor unions sought revolution by electoral means. And their activism on issues of employment and wages caused domestic contradictions to spill out across the world. Inflation now undermined the celebrated discipline of the pound sterling, which had provided the foundation of the global trading system. This spectacle was instructive to Europe's young neoliberal economists, who had an instinctive disdain for democracy, and who set about trying to defend capital from the influence of national governments and their electorates.

One solution to class war was nationalism. There was a concerted effort, at the turn of the twentieth century, to persuade the working classes that the interests of "crown and country" were aligned with their own. Nearly a century

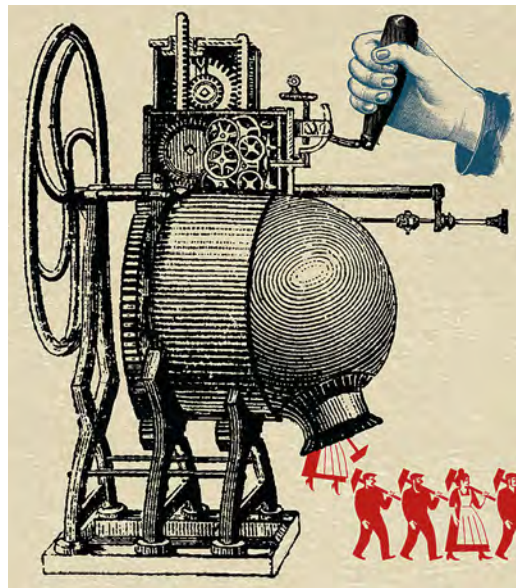
after the inception of Britain's global supremacy, workers began to share in the surplus: salaries rose markedly, and were soon supplemented by unprecedented welfare payments. By the First World War, British workers were not merely the exploited objects of the global economy, they were also among its beneficiaries, granted the pleasures of savings and consumerism. The increasing abjection of the colonized world also delivered intangible consolations, on which the Western psyche still depends: empire produced enormous inequality between different regions of the planet, and citizenship of an imperial country was itself beginning to feel like a precious commodity, even for the poor. There was a powerful racial component to this feeling: in a racially organized world, white supremacy could compensate for class subordination, and

many workers derived new dignity from the race theory and colonial condescension of their superiors.

Only after the Second World War would Britain's two economies finally merge. With global property holdings and the international trading system in ruins, all Western European states constructed comprehensive national economies: national capital combined with national labor steered by national social democracy. Even the former "leisured classes" now needed jobs, and with

Western labor at its peak value, and growth touching 6 percent, industriousness became the basis for social participation. There was broad, cross-class consent for a historically anomalous formula—full employment, inflated salaries, high taxes, endless consumption, and generous public subsidies.

In return for such wholesale concessions to the principle of labor, that of property was left intact—despite strenuous attempts to curtail it (not least by Britain's Labour Party). Partly because of the new superpower's forceful interventions—America's own survival depended on European resurrection, and it used the lever of the Marshall Plan to press its vision of a free-market "European Union"—European states continued their protection of private property, markets remained open, and socialist demands for fundamental changes to the structure of ownership were edged out.



As long as the components of society and economy were so miraculously balanced, not only could European states afford democracy, they needed it. Capitalism was run as a national utility, and democracy found its consummation as an essential management apparatus. Elected representatives of business and labor monitored economic data and class feeling, and negotiated rapid social compromises, allowing the system to continue producing growth for all. Democracy enabled capitalism to draw on powerful social energies, convincing the European masses—in many countries, for the first time—that the state and its economy now belonged to them. For a while, revolution disappeared from the European repertoire.

During this same period, of course, American democracy was distorted by the demands of empire. The global currency was now administered by America's national institutions, which therefore had to be placed beyond the reach of U.S. voters. Abjuring territorial occupation, the empire also needed to devote enormous resources to influencing or capturing foreign countries' policymaking—which necessitated substantial covert capabilities. There was a palpable authoritarian mood.

Despite its efforts, the empire was unsuccessful, during the decades of postwar reconstruction and decolonization, at creating a fully integrated system for global capital (that would have to wait until our own era). Even in America, then, there was a national economy, which paid democratic dividends. U.S. corporations were indeed becoming multinational—they supplied the empire's tangible armature—but at home they were authentically American: they deployed American capital and American labor, paid American taxes, and sold goods to American consumers. They were also substantially responsible for developing the social model for the national economy—high growth, low class friction—that was subsequently exported to Europe and Japan. General Motors' landmark 1950 deal with the United Auto Workers bound workers to accept corporate growth and scheduled pay raises—rather than labor activism—as the proper resolution of class contradictions. In an era of such rapid growth, both sides could afford such a compromise. It was signed, moreover, in a moment of unusual economic equanimity: GM board members possessed nothing like the shareholdings of their prewar predecessors, yet in 1965 the CEO earned only twenty times what a worker did (compared with nearly three hundred times today).

Meanwhile, the federal government promoted mortgages for America's securely em-

ployed working class, further neutralizing social opposition to the principle of property. Well-paid, home-owning American workers quickly learned the transformative potential of that principle, and reconciled themselves to the fact that neither political party offered the possibility of voting against it. Precisely because the economy was geographically bounded, administrators possessed real control over its inputs and outputs, and the contrasting managerial approaches of the two political parties produced distinct results: voting actually changed things. There was unusual consensus about social objectives, and democracy became an authentic mechanism for national management. If it had its flaws, the extraordinary momentum of those years convinced many that history would resolve them.

Once again, global supremacy was useful for quelling residual working-class ill will. The American empire was even more effective at concentrating global wealth than Britain had been: economic inequality among the world's

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regions, which had risen consistently from the 1820s, reached its peak in the 1970s—precisely when inequality within the United States was at its lowest. There was status in the mere fact of being American. But white inclusion was the priority: it was crucial for administrators that white working-class activists, who had brought business to its knees in the 1930s, should not join forces with their black counterparts. Even Lyndon Johnson made clear how much the American democratic balance depended on such manipulation: “If you can convince the lowest white man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you.” Though disenfranchisement of African Americans was officially outlawed in 1965, the Supreme Court soon endorsed felony disenfranchisement, which by the time of the 2016 election barred more than six million mostly non-white Americans from voting. If there was ever a heyday of American democracy, it was recent and short-lived.

The cross-class accord of the national economy, fragile and partial though it was, is often held up as the authentic manifestation of American civilization. But

neoliberal ideologues—such as Friedrich von Hayek and his Chicago disciples—still dreamed of liberating capital from the clutches of national politics, restoring nineteenth-century internationalism, and undoing the labor-friendly aberrations that had been institutionalized by the New Deal. America’s golden age was for them a dark age—so they drew up plans for revolution. In the 1970s, those plans came out of the drawer. Today, after five decades of political, financial, and technological transformation, the American empire no longer tolerates national economic containers. The structure of the economy has resumed what we might call its more normal (i.e., transnational) guise. As a result, the principle of property is once again supreme and the principle of labor is in retreat.

The most visible consequence of this change is financial inequality. The incomes of the bottom 50 percent of workers have shown little increase over the past forty years; most men in this group earn less now than in 1980. Incomes at the ninetieth percentile, meanwhile, have increased

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by nearly 40 percent in the same time (and by more for white people), while for the top 1 percent the figure is 157 percent. The richest one tenth of one percent of society enjoys an exceptional situation: in a normal year, earnings grow at a rate in the high single digits, so large wealth-owners continually expand their share—becoming, in the process, ever more removed from mass existence. This is true across the West: the determined efforts of countries such as Germany and France to offset inequality with taxes and transfers are each year placed under greater strain. But in America, inequality has already reached levels not seen since the First World War. According to a recent UN report, forty million Americans now live in poverty, including 5.3 million “in Third-World conditions of absolute poverty.” The richest fifteen Americans, meanwhile, have a combined wealth of more than a trillion dollars. That a bank clerk or restaurant manager might join their ranks is as likely as a Georgian plowman waking up to find he is the duke of Somerset.

But inequality is the manifestation of something more significant: the economy is once more separating into two. After the rapid growth of the postwar decades, America’s “first” economy has resumed more historically typical rates of 1 or

2 percent (though in 2020, it will contract by about 7 percent). But the average conceals wildly different class velocities. Private-equity firms, for instance, deliver returns of 25 percent a year, which, according to the *Financial Times*, are generally “only available to institutions and wealthy individuals,” since “risk, illiquidity and complex fee structures” exclude “unsophisticated investors.” Average CEO compensation has grown by 25 percent per year for the past forty years; in fact, Fortune 500 CEOs do not really earn salaries today—because there is no remaining principle of labor—so much as rents. This is the natural result of the neoliberal revolution: the political power of society’s bottom 90 percent has declined, and they no longer possess much influence over the distribution of resources.

In recent years, the “second” economy has become organized around a group of new companies whose business, like the trading monopolies of the eighteenth century, is the transformation of the capitalist system itself. And once again, their commercial ventures are so far-reaching that they promise to subsume the political system. Spatial extension and integration remain important (there is even an extraterrestrial surfeit: space-travel ventures such as those led by Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Richard Branson attract billions of dollars every year). But the most spectacular value creation over the past two decades has generated new varieties of space altogether. The internet, too, is a “new-found-land,” whose inchoate expanse has been coded into property using legal concepts directly descended from those with which America was founded. The British Empire’s conversion of the vast indigenous economy of North America into aristocratic property provides an illuminating parallel, in fact, for a company like Amazon, whose trillion-dollar market capitalization is derived from the usurpation of a thriving pre-existing system of shops, markets, libraries, and the like. With their bundles of patents and global monopolies, twenty-first-century tech conglomerates have swelled to the scale of eighteenth-century trading companies—and with a speed quite foreign to the plodding first economy. But they are more than just businesses: Silicon Valley firms have a profound impact on world organization, and key players such as Peter Thiel—creator of PayPal, early investor in Facebook, and co-founder of the surveillance company Palantir Technologies—possess political power greater than most heads of state.

The old caveats apply once more. First, the second economy serves elites almost exclusively. Again it is chiefly financialized, and holding

financial instruments remains the preserve of the rich: 84 percent of corporate stock is owned by the wealthiest 10 percent. But even this decile is largely denied access to the heart of the second economy. Some 80 percent of Facebook stock—worth over half a trillion dollars—is owned by twenty-five individuals and institutions; though Mark Zuckerberg retains only 28 percent of the company, this includes a vital 60 percent of the Class B voting shares. Since Facebook is an entity comparable in scale to a nation-state, and serves some of the same functions, this determination not to share political power is instructive. Valuations of such companies are inflated by their monopolistic nature—and by the financial institutions that control them—to the point of total departure from the first economy. This fall, during the most serious economic recession since the 1930s, the values of Tesla, Amazon, and Facebook all hit record stock-market highs.

Financial fiction has real consequences: Elon Musk earned more than \$2 billion in 2019, while his company Tesla lost \$862 million (and received far more in subsidies from state and federal governments than it paid in taxes). Inflated valuations allow Silicon Valley giants to maintain their monopolies: they can raise almost infinite cash for the purpose of acquiring new or competing technologies. The valuations of target companies then explode, too, but street-level investors, once again, are shut out of these stratospheric early gains, which flow to the same impregnable oligarchy.

Second, the growth of this other economy is once again increasingly independent of the population at large. Given the value created by American labor in the twentieth century, this could not have occurred without a single-minded effort. We know how it was achieved: through the planetary redistribution of production, neoliberal globalization dismantled bounded national economies and undid capital's dependence on pampered Western workers. If authoritarian China benefited most conspicuously, it is because the objective was never merely cheap labor. It was to escape the democratic excesses of the West's own past. After the rout of Tiananmen Square protesters in 1989—which demonstrated that China's new capitalism would not succumb to the decadence of the twentieth-century West—global capital rushed gratefully in. During the 1980s, Chinese foreign direct investment had hovered around \$2 billion; by the mid-Nineties, it had grown more than tenfold. Today, American industry is entirely integrated with China, whose democracy-free system is essential to the timely delivery of products by Apple, Cisco,

Dell, HP, GE, IBM, Intel, Texas Instruments, etc. "Cold war" is too convenient a phrase for the recent standoffs between the United States and China—since it implies that the United States might win. China is itself a reemerging empire. It cannot evolve endlessly within the context of the American empire, and what is happening right now is just one of many stages in the advent of a new order. (A similar break took place in the nineteenth century between Britain and America, which stole superpower systems and technologies until such time as it could set its own terms of engagement.)

The creation of the West's industrial battalions was of enormous moral and political importance, and the full consequences of their destruction are still unfolding, as the offspring of the defeated generations reach their prime. Industrial employment has largely been replaced with what David Graeber called "bullshit jobs," and the bottom 50 percent are drifting back to their preindustrial condition: dispersed, politically and spiritually weak, on the periphery. Millions of Americans dull the pain with prescription opioids. Seventy thousand die every year from drug overdoses, most of them in states where endless propaganda advises them to solve their problems with guns and credit cards.

But the shift won't be reversed: the system can no longer afford Western production, and even America's poor are dependent on the subsidy of cheap Asian labor to maintain their precarious consumer status. Along with debt, of course. U.S. consumers have incurred nearly \$1 trillion in credit card debt, \$1.5 trillion in student loans, another \$1.3 trillion in auto debt, and almost \$10 trillion in mortgages.

All this, however, is nothing but turbulent preface. Current efforts to disentangle wealth from the American population are even more radical. Triumphant robotic capitalism employs new technologies to automate and commodify work so that the political defeat of the bottom 50 percent can be extended to the bottom 90 percent.

Many mid-level jobs have already been rendered obsolete in sectors such as architecture, law, accountancy, teaching, and medicine (and many more salaries, therefore, have been absorbed as corporate wealth). This is a stunning volte-face for the middle classes, who are still inclined to believe that the system exists to serve them, and so entertain the hope that it will create the same number of high-paying jobs as were destroyed. But there is no basis for such hope. The prospect of large corporations run by owner-strategists without human management is not far off and, as state subsidies are simultaneously withdrawn, the middle classes

will be unable to pass their savings, property, and status on to their children. Their erstwhile social and political standing will follow that of the West's steelworkers, shipbuilders, and coal miners. The coming evacuation may cause American capitalism to collapse. But that will not discourage the catastrophe elite, which is fascinated by its own death drive (working out how to survive death is a notorious Silicon Valley hobby).

The process has been expedited by the coronavirus lockdowns, which have migrated social and economic processes to digital platforms more quickly than anyone could have anticipated—and supplied useful legitimization along the way. Becoming the first person to possess \$200 billion might have been more awkward for Jeff Bezos were his company not simultaneously supplying essential distribution infrastructure to a world with no stores. Acknowledging technology's increasingly fundamental role, New York governor Andrew Cuomo recently invited Bill Gates, Eric Schmidt, and Michael Bloomberg to collaborate on a plan for the state during and after the pandemic—a plan in which, obviously, the role of artificial intelligence will be enormously enhanced. In a moment when other human beings represent a toxic threat, antihuman propaganda will surely find adherents in ways it never could before. We have already accepted that machines are better at diagnosing cancer and driving cars; we will soon find ourselves consenting to an algorithmic government and legal system.

Silicon Valley will not simply destroy the jobs on which the industrious society was built. It will corrode and negate the principle of labor. It will do this in part by establishing unpaid, uncontracted labor as a social norm.

The iconic example is Facebook, a sudden concentration of \$700 billion almost entirely insulated from the population at large: not only is ownership closely held, employment is confined to compact teams of highly paid specialists. Like its Silicon Valley peers, Facebook disguises prof-

it and moves it offshore so that its wealth does not seep into society through taxes. The company has paid an average of 10.2 percent in taxes over the past decade. The negative consequences of this do not affect Facebook: it sells almost exclusively to other businesses, and so does not depend directly on affluent consumers. And yet its sales and valuation would be zero without users, all of whom donate the company's raw material—their personal data—for free. Facebook users spend billions of hours uploading data, but this work is disguised as consumption, and there is no hint of compensation. This overturns essential principles from the old industrious society. For Silicon Valley, work is a form of tribute paid by individuals to quasi-aristocratic property owners, and there are no privileges granted in return. Quite the opposite: tributaries

surrender their claim to their own information and privacy, and open themselves up to ever-greater corporate surveillance and manipulation. This social norm is spreading: the U.S. Department of Labor recently relaxed restrictions on unpaid work, while the frequent talk of a universal basic income concedes that work can no longer provide the basis for social participation. The principle of labor is ebbing fast.

Eighteenth-century Britain could not afford democracy. Today, as the economy

reverts to a similar structure, America is encountering the same problem. It is difficult to carry out a mass economic expulsion, after all, while everyone has a vote. And it will not be possible indefinitely to suppress those left-wing voices demanding that the state abandon its *raison d'être* and serve, not property and empire, but American citizens themselves. The stakes, in other words, could not be higher: if the present order is to continue, an almighty war must take place in U.S. politics. While eighteenth-century Britain also did not need democracy, America is very far from reaching that stage.

Both Donald Trump and Boris Johnson represent social types—self-promoting real estate tycoon, haute-bourgeoisie braggart—that were well represented in Britain's eighteenth-century House of Commons.



Both also equivocated when it came to protecting their populations from the coronavirus, making it clear that fastidious precautions did not sit well with their political virility. This was not merely because they wished to spare the economy; it was also because saving lives would reinforce the political bargain they were in office to undo.

The idea that the Western state exists to preserve the lives of its citizens dates only to the twentieth century—when national political communities became universal, and the bulk of state expenditure finally shifted, as some have phrased it, from warfare to welfare. For British and American populations threatened with mass infection, this principle was nonnegotiable, and their leaders had no choice but to sacrifice other state purposes to saving lives. This belated realization was a defeat, however, for Trump and Johnson, whose energy was supposed to be occupied with rolling back the democratic advances of the twentieth century, and restoring the elite political freedoms of the eighteenth.

How does a modern leader embark on such a task? Some of those who funded Trump's 2016 campaign hoped simply that he would cut taxes on businesses and the rich: maintaining America as a haven for global capital would be enough to further entrench the oligarchy. But some of Trump's coterie were already trying to run private state functions of their own—such as armies and currencies—and they probably expected a more violent reckoning with the status quo. "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible," Peter Thiel, Trump's principal advocate in Silicon Valley, once wrote in a techno-libertarian manifesto. "The fate of our world may depend on the effort of a single person who builds or propagates the machinery of freedom that makes the world safe for capitalism." Thiel and others understood the extraordinary demands of the moment: with economic prosperity so wildly divergent, traditional measures might no longer be adequate to suppress the rising tide of "socialism." Both Silicon Valley and the White House also flirted with "alt-right" ideologues who brazenly rejected twentieth-century political theory, speaking of a "dark enlightenment" that would sweep away democracy and other consequences of the French Revolution, replacing the nation-state system with a global patchwork of neo-feudal corporate fiefdoms.

Such thinking required things to break, and Trump came into power as a wrecking ball, a role for which his celebrity and vulgarity qualified him well. He created a "populist" alliance of financial elites with anxious masses, and he sought to uproot the latter

from their last remaining expectations of material advancement—converting them instead to a parallel system of immaterial consolations and rewards. Traditional solutions for disenfranchisement and postindustrial grief were closed off; the only currency the president now dispensed was violent sensation. Trump vowed to protect "good" Americans from an ever-expanding range of scapegoats: rich people, poor people, gay people, black people, Latinos, Jews, Muslims, immigrants, women, scientists, intellectuals, Democrats, politicians, CNN, the *New York Times*, hackers, vandals, hoodlums, agitators, terrorists, Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, Europe, Canada, the World Health Organization, the United Nations, and many more. Race was particularly important, of course. The major economic process of the moment, after all, transferred mass prosperity from the West to Asia—the first significant interruption to white-supremacist world organization in centuries, which disrupted the carefully managed racial hierarchies on which American

TRUMP TOOK EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO WEAKEN AMERICANS' ATTACHMENT TO THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM THAT HAD BROUGHT HIM TO POWER

democracy was built. Trump's apoplectic assaults on China and his colonial attitudes toward Africa offered many white people the hope that he might preserve the old symbolic order, and so supply a most traditional consolation for the heartlessness of twenty-first-century neoliberal depredation.

Xenophobia, racism, and national triumphalism can provide a more stable basis for government than we like to admit. But Trump could not be certain that people would continue to vote against their own economic interests (it was reported at the end of 2019 that U.S. inequality had reached its highest point on record), and early in his tenure he turned to the issue of electoral reform. That is a thorny route to take. His Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity (also known as the Voter Fraud Commission) was widely thought to be an instrument of voter suppression; it attracted seven lawsuits and collapsed in 2018. Not to be discouraged, Trump took every opportunity to weaken Americans' attachment to the electoral system that had brought him to power. Like many demagogues, he encouraged his supporters to prize the removal of others' rights above the preservation of their own. Fans cheered his various anticonstitutional quips—about

withdrawing enemies' American citizenship, defying election results, extending his term ("Do you think the people would demand that I stay longer? Keep America great!")—and so colluded in their own disenfranchisement. If less than half the U.S. population is now satisfied with democracy as a system, down from 75 percent in 1995, this is partly the result of Trump's determined effort to present it as a liability to the MAGA endeavor: it was subject to fraud, it was infiltrated by foreigners, it gave a voice to unpatriotic Americans.

But the defeat of democracy is difficult to accomplish from the Oval Office. And Trump, in the broad scheme of things, is insignificant. He was never a man of vision. He was just a political thug, which was what the moment required. The assault on American democracy will outlast him, and it will be engineered—even if unintentionally—by the oligarchs of Silicon Valley.

Facebook possesses the greatest potential to restore the political balance of the eighteenth century. Its inflated market capitalization is based not only on its future earnings, but also on its capacity for global political management. In this sense, it is laughable to worry only about Russians or Chinese infiltrating American politics: it is already fully infiltrated by Big Data. We have long envisioned the end of democracy as something out of a Hollywood dystopia; it will not be starkly militaristic, however, but cool and convenient in the Silicon Valley style. Democracy will not be repealed so much as rendered inconsequential and incorporated into a mightier system of social and ideological management—as humans learn, for instance, that they can outsource to machines not just their memories and their friendships, but also their political opinions. Instead of mass rallies and totalitarian cults, society will fragment into mutually incomprehensible bubbles, and only celebrity will possess the transcendental power necessary to deliver electoral numbers. Celebrity, of course, is essentially a Big Data product today. We may soon realize that what Kim Kardashian and others have really been up to is building constituencies.

Tech firms will not just transform the nature of democratic access. Like their eighteenth-century predecessors, they will alter the nation-state itself, placing ever more of its functions under unelected control. It has been clear since what one commentator calls "the first Sino-Google conflict of 2009" that Big Data is quite different from, say, Big Auto or Big Oil, which bully and bend the state but ultimately share its organizing principles. Having quickly driven out other forms of social participation, Silicon

Valley offers new political and economic arrangements that are irreconcilable with the old. Antitrust measures by the U.S. government against them are, in this sense, epochal: they represent not just regulation as usual but a battle between competing forms of life. And if the state has the power to discipline the corporations, the reverse is also true. As the state has become increasingly dependent on Silicon Valley for many of its core activities—mapping, law enforcement, immigration control, warfare—it has betrayed many of the principles on which its legitimacy was previously based, such as privacy. Silicon Valley's global influence is waxing just as America's conventional imperial power wanes; there will certainly be those in government who would prefer to exploit the power of these monopolies than break them up.

Over time, tech firms will build a more complete social and economic system, competing more aggressively with the state and further diminishing its ability to deliver material assistance to its citizenry. They are already attempting to end the state's monopoly on issuing currency. In the present moment of state profligacy, cryptocurrency evangelists are urging investors to flee national currencies for the security of what they propagandistically call "decentralized finance" (the aggressive tenor of the abbreviation—"DeFi"—is not accidental). Apple and Google already offer banking services, while Facebook's embryonic currency, the libra, could provide a means of exchange for two billion Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp users. (WeChat Pay and Alipay already perform this function for China's private online societies.)

The neoliberal revolution aimed to restore the supremacy of capital after its twentieth-century subjugation by nation-states, and it has succeeded to an astonishing degree. As states compete and collude with gargantuan new private powers, a new political world arises. The principle of labor, which dominated the twentieth century—producing the industrious, democratic society we have come to regard, erroneously, as the norm—is once again being supplanted by a principle of property, the implications and consequences of which we know only too well from our history books.

The real political battle in America today is not between a "liberal" left and a "fascist" right. It is between the people and a grandiose private system of social, economic, and political management that has the power to bring to an end the democratic certainties on which Americans have come to rely. If we wish to preserve those certainties, we will have to do a lot more than remove Donald Trump. ■