Abstract: Jean-Baptiste VELUT

Contested Plutocracy: reformist and radical forms of social advocacy in America

In the United States, the past two decades have often been described as the apex of a “New Gilded Age”, a return to *laissez faire* combined with rising corporate power and growing social inequalities. According to this scenario, the Democratic and the Republican Parties, both co-opted by private interests, have joined forces to remove regulatory obstacles and dismantle the remnants of the American welfare state in the name of global competitiveness. The latest evidence of this anti-statist trend lies in the renewed calls for austerity measures in a context of rising poverty and unemployment.

Despite its dislocating effects on the American people, the free-market agenda has not remained uncontested. In various spheres of American society, different forms of collective action have emerged to protest against the collusion of political and economic elites and the betrayal of America’s traditional values of equal opportunity and freedom. Thus, since the 1990s, American grassroots movements have mobilized for global justice, launched local living wage campaigns and “Occupied” public spaces to protest against social inequalities. “Citizen consumers” have activated their buying power and repoliticized consumption through boycotts and “buycotts” on behalf of fair trade and “sweatfree” products.

Without historical distance, these isolated eruptions of discontent may seem like the death throes of American democracy. Yet, they may constitute the early forms of a broader pattern of social change such as the progressive “movement of movements” that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. This paper intends to explore this hypothesis by establishing a common thread between these various forms of social advocacy. Building upon theories of social change, the author will discuss the potential impact of contemporary forms of disruptive behavior on America’s contested democracy.

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