THE NEW PARTY: A DIALOGUE

As its name suggests, The New Party is a new political party which was formed three years ago by a diverse group of people to provide a viable alternative to both of the major American political parties. Since 1992, the New Party has been working to cultivate support from the ground up. It is a "value-centered and issue-driven organization, one that believes the Party should be guided by a set of ideas and principles." Here, to discuss some of those issues and principles, we include a dialogue between New Party founding members Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, and W.B. Allen.

After Liberalism

by Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers

Last November and everything that has come since should inspire rethinkings — serious rethinkings — among those committed to democracy in this country. It's not that Contract politics and Republican cyberpunks announce a general collapse of collaborative values. They may not even inaugurate a long period of Republican political dominance. But they are very bad news, and no effective response to them will come from the present Democratic leadership. In fact, no effective response can be offered by conventional Democratic liberalisers, which now lacks a coherent program and a social base. Democratic renewal will require a different sort of public.

Where We Are

According to Republicans, insurgent voters sent a "clear undeniable message" by ratifying the Contract. Not so. The Republican won with only 14 percent of the eligible electorate. The Democratic share of the vote dropped just two points from 1992. A vanishingly small share of voters had even heard of the Contract they were allegedly signing; polls since have shown majorities approval to many of its key terms. As usual in American politics, the election was far more an economic referendum than an ideological one: those gaining economically voted overwhelmingly for the incumbent party and those losing voted them out.

But such observations should provide little comfort. With or without a mandate, the radical Republicans now in power are out to do some real damage. They aim to repeal the New Deal along with the Great Society — to disable the affirmative state by mandating supermajorities on tax increases; repeal or render toothless virtually all important environmental, consumer, and worker protections; remove through "fart reform" the possibility of direct citizen action against corporate power; recommit vast reaches of the educational system, ensure worsening inequality, and squander among the poor by appointing business-dominated local governments as their reluctant (and increasingly bankrupt) guardians.

To be sure, the Contract is only the beginning. Beyond it lie social revitalization, cultural purification, heavenly redemption. But the Contract — described by Bush advisor James Pinkston as "essentially a pre-business agenda" — needs to be in place before such heavy lifting can get started. The appropriate analogy is 1954, the last time the Republicans controlled the Senate and the House, but 1896, when the massive defeat of the populists initiated a period of Republican and business dominance that lasted until the New Deal.

And the Democrats? Back in the painful, pre-Contract days of one-party government, the Clinton administration's proudest achievements were deficit reduction and reduced domestic investment, two trade bills without worker rights or environmental standards. Democrats are the party of government; government costs money, and unless the White "middle class" (a.k.a. working class) believes government action benefits them they are usually unwilling to pay its costs or support the party associated with them. Democrats are the party of government; government costs money, and unless the White "middle class" (a.k.a. working class) believes government action benefits them they are usually unwilling to pay its costs or support the party associated with them.

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The problem with all these explanations is that they take to narrow a view of Democratic difficulties. New Deal style social-democratic politics are in trouble everywhere. No party anywhere is winning elections on the old promises — to beat back the market with an affirmative state committed to full employment, a fair distribution of income, and an efficient provision of essential public goods — because the world in which such promises were credible has largely disappeared.

To understand and find a way out of the present disasters of Democratic politics, we need to take measure of that change. In the old world, the responsibilities of government were understood as principally economic; and the economy operated on Keynesian premises. Aided by unions and other private multipliers on its effort, government policy sought (within limits) to stabilize mass demand, which gave firms markets for sales and thus reason to invest, which increased productivity and lowered the costs of mass consumption goods bought by ever better-paid workers. The damage such consumption-led productivity and income growth did to the environment was not a major issue. Policy attention to the costs of "social" reproduction -- keeping a culture, raising kids — was excused by stable communities and traditional families in which women did most of that work.

More particularly, the politics of the old world relied on:

- A national-state capable of insulating the economic environment within its territory — a national economy sufficiently insulated from foreign competitors that the benefits of demand-stimulus could be reliably captured by firms within its borders, and a monetary policy apparatus sufficiently insulated from world-wide financial flows to permit unilateral, easy-money corrections to recession.

- The organization of the economic core into a system of mass production dominated by large, lead, stable firms. The size and stability of these firms made them ready targets for worker organization as well as levers to extend the benefits of organization throughout the economy. The organization of production within them also tended to underscore some modicum of class solidarity. Working on the assembly line, it wasn't too hard to figure out which side you were on.

- The dominance of class concerns in the politics of equality. This dominance depended on a more or less determinate working class (obviously more in Europe than here, but still) whose organi-
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More sharply delineated limits on the capacity of the state to promote the general welfare. These limits result in part from internationalization — which means that foreign competitors can beat domestic firms to expanding domestic markets, and firms are better able to exit unfavorable tax or regulatory regimes. In larger part they stem from changing demands on the state, which underscore limits on the state's institutional competence. While governments are “all thumbs and no fingers,” fingers are now what are commonly in demand — in economic policy, to address the time issues of labor market transitions and firm modernization; in social policy, to pick up where destroyed communities and job-holding women leave off; in economic and social regulation, where common standards need to be applied in diverse contexts or developed through negotiation among affected actors; in political deliberation itself, where money and sound bites have so fully replaced people and argument that “discussion” seems a waste.

The collapse of traditional mass production, and with that collapse, the anachronism of the (male) working class as the privileged agent of equality. While increased competition among firms has occasioned many strategies of response — from simple sweating of labor to lean production to high-skill strategies geared to product distinctiveness — all disrupt the commonalities of experience that provided the foundation of traditional industrialism. Firms are more decentralized and varied in the terms and conditions of work they offer, career paths and rewards are more jumbled, and the heterogeneity of skills provides a further source of division. The fracturing of the male working class coincided with its changing sexual composition, as women joined men in wage slavery. In addition to complicating the tasks of working class organization, women's entry presses into sharp relief the costs of social reproduction — once confidently assigned to the private household, outside the bounds of politics. Another source of new demands on the state, these changes make it harder to decide what the economic fight is all about, and — as they blur the boundaries between society and household — which institutions are responsible for what.

Informed political heterogeneity within the broader class of citizens who might support democratic ideals. If the organization of the working class as a determinate class has been qualified, so too has acceptance of its material concerns as universal something asserted since Marx, but achieved only after Keynes. Indeed, the very idea of universalism is in disrepair. As an organizational matter, no institution but business is sufficiently powerful to impose its interest as the general interest. As a matter of ideology, none but the sectarian are prepared to elevate any particular interest — whether class or gender or race or the environment or sexual liberation — to that exalted status. And in everyday life and culture, the relentless privatization of civic culture makes the idea of a new universal class of other-regarding citizens increasingly barren.

New Deal social-democratic politics is in trouble, then, because the economy is no longer under any effective social control; the institutions and practices that once provided that control are suspect or disappearing; the range of interests and concerns up for discussion is broader than it once was; and the conditions for generating social discussion of those concerns are widely absent.

In this world, cooperative social projects are less plausible and appealing than they once were. It makes more sense to cut your own deal.

Running the Economy as if Values, and Place, Mattered

A natural place to begin such movement is with the economy. The dominant experience of most Americans is that the economy is running their lives (down), and they have generally given up hope that the world could be any different. The conventional explanation is that the internationalization of product, capital, and even labor markets makes social control of the economy impossible. With everything in the economy, shoving around or potentially shoving around and across international borders, political boundary have lost their economic significance. Place doesn't matter. And because it does not, there is no way to make values matter — no way for people organized in some place to impose some social standards on the economy.

But this description of our economy and the possibilities of its social direction is deeply misleading. Internationalization, while important, has been vastly exaggerated; most U.S. manufacturers buy and sell overwhelmingly to themselves; most manufacturing sectors have evinced international competition, and the long-trend of the U.S. economy is toward more services, usually not in trade at all. And even within internationalized industries of competition with profit-taking constraints, alternative strategies with very different social consequences are available. Choices between them can be shaped by factors clearly under our control. Even the diminished state retains a large share of employment and purchasing power, not to mention the ability to pass laws. It can use that power to establish standards on economic practice, to support some strategies of industrial restructuring over others, to limit public supports to those adhering to public standards. And even a hollow capital relies, in its most advanced productive forms, on immobile public goods — decent school systems, transport systems, safe neighborhoods, clean environments — which if provided in places can help poor investment there.

Even if such a project were available in theory, however, would it be available in practice? Is there any good reason to think that its potential beneficiaries could actually unite in its advance?

Yes there is. Consider, as a hard case, our nation's major metropolitan areas — where most people live, where the consequences of an economy unattended by social control are painfully evident, where those who would benefit from a more humane order are profoundly divided. Even there, a political alliance is waiting to happen among a series of groups that have, for the past 40 years or more, defined themselves as mutual antagonists.

Take the White dominated labor movement. Because of its declining city membership it cannot protect itself against low-wage privatization and the destruction of regional labor market standards, let alone assure the public investments needed to support high-wage production and services, without the voting support of the central Black and Hispanic populations. And those populations know that their economic devastation will not be reversed anytime soon through an increased welfare effort or expanded public sector. They need private sector investment and jobs within their communities — best provided by firms and individuals rooted in those communities themselves — and access to jobs without, and they need those jobs to pay a living wage — all things more likely to be achieved if they were allied with unions.

At the same time, environmentalists and those concerned about organization inside firms may find common ground on the supply-side of production. Just as unions have found that they can only defend member interests by invoking what was once taken to be the inviolate "core of entrepreneurial control" — decisions about technology, product strategy, investments, work organization, work relocation, and the like — environmentalists recognize that man-
A disorganized people will always be defeated by private business power, which can be expected to resist standards of accountability.

By permitting those with popular support but little money to mount credible candidates, such a program would create office-holding more widely available and ensure greater equality of political influence. And it would — combined perhaps with significant limits on campaign contributions — restore some measure of citizen confidence in government and electoral accountability.

With elections cleared up in this way, moreover, the road would be cleared for other efforts to build the social infrastructure of democracy. Moving beyond the "five free or die" choice between private hierarchies and public markets, democrats should be encouraging the state to intervene and staff the public deliberations and deals needed to solve social problems. Instead of simply reviving environmental regulations or scaling back on their enforcement, local government might, for example, bring industry, environmental advocacy, and community and labor groups together, and see roughly "these are the general standards the voters have decided they want met; you figure out a way to meet them and get back to us with your proposal." Or radical labor law reform could facilitate worker formation of "unions" — not just the sorts of organizations that go by that name now, but various kinds of independent worker organizations rooted in the economy. And those unions could be assigned a role in economic reconstruction — say, through their assistance in organizing regional labor market boards, or local training and labor "halls" for youth and displaced workers. Throughout, state purchasing power as well as other means could be used to encourage associative activity that is democratic, sufficiently inclusive of affected interests, and technically informed.

Such moves would produce a government much more genuinely "of the people" and administration and definition of social problems infinitely more "by the people." The state would certainly not disappear, but its appropriate function as the privileged area of popular deliberation about social ends, and articulation of social standards, would be more prominent than its excessively delegitimized role as administrator of problems it lacks the capacity to solve.

Who, Then? If the polls and common sense are to be believed, such a program could reach a huge political market. Still, it will need to be fought for. And that fight requires a political party — an encompassing political organization that exists to articulate programs and to advance them by winning elections.

Is that the Democratic Party? At the national level, at least anytime soon, we seriously doubt it. National Democratic Party leadership is almost wholly business-dominated. And for most middle-class liberal Democratic supporters, the thought of turning power over to citizens is horrifying — a world of right-wing talk radio and repressive state initiatives. For both types of activists and controls, a program like this would require a jump out of their skins.

In truth, however, we cannot hope to influence national leadership anytime soon, and don't need to wait on it to get started. At the local level, it is possible to imagine political formations, operating both inside and outside the Democratic Party, that could arise almost overnight to do the necessary work. These would be value-centered organizations (parties) rather than candidate-centered ones. And they would operate first in the network of non-partisan races and local partisan ones that do not draw big money or where party label is less important or obscure. Building those organizations — as, for example, the New Party is now doing in several cities — is a natural project for progressives, postponing any final adjudication about relations with national Democrats.

Imagine, then, New Party or New Party-like formations that help catalyze efforts at comprehensive alternative economic development and radical democratic reforms — paving the road as they move along it — and recruit average citizens to run for office (often nonpartisan office) on the basis of their commitment to that program. Imagine that these separate efforts share intellectual and financial resources — for program development, training, media — and think of themselves as united, at least in their effort to bring this kind of alternative to the American people. Imagine this alternative working in major metropolitan areas, through a combustible mix of strange allies on a more moral economy, facilitated by state action, and changes in the rules of the game to assist both. Imagine this done in 10 states with major electoral populations — states in which capture of the major metropolitan areas would give powerful weight in state governments themselves. Let your imagination go from there, or just imagine much better-run and democratic metropolitan region and states. Either way it's a win.
Possibility and Necessity

This sort of strategy is available to us. In 1994, the Democrats were going down to defeat, citizen-led initiatives on radical campaign finance reform along the lines mentioned passed in Montana, Oregon, and Missouri, and missed only narrowly in Colorado; in Massachusetts, the threat of such an initiative forced the legislature to its most radical campaign finance reform in history. Today, substantial efforts at comprehensive alternative economic development, along with the lines indicated, are underway in places as diverse as Brooklyn, Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, Oregon, and San Jose — with real discussion across issues, real norms imposed on the regional economy, real deals being cut between former antagonists. And, running on a program of democratic reform and alternative development, over the past two years the heavily urban-based New Party has won 80 out of 100 sub-Congressional electoral races — electing New Party or New Party Democrats to school boards, administrative authorities, city councils, county boards, and state legislatures.

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They have just published the first edition of their newsletter.

In the following short essay, W.B. Allen comments on Cohen and Rogers, and more broadly on the direction the New Party intends to take.

The Age Of Final Policy:
Heirs Of Antifederalists Lose Faith
In Their Fathers

by W.B. Allen

American politics forgoes apathy with remarkable indulgence. Marxists and communists frequently learned this, as they harangued from barricades to submission over a sixty year period. Consistently misreading the culture of American politics and often speaking as aliens rather than peers, they nonetheless benefited from recognition as "fellow citizens." Throughout this period, and continuing still, progressives have built upon foundations of antifederalism — fears of privilege and organized wealth — with out ever understanding why the Antifederalists considered theirs the true conception of democracy. In the most recent agonizing about American political culture these heirs of Antifederalists (not the only heirs by any means) reflect sustained commitment to antifederalist democracy but have made no advance in understanding its genuine aims. For that reason, now and ever since the inception of the New Deal, they have pursued the one substantive goal which is entirely incompatible with antifederalism — namely, the conceit that there is some one policy or one set of policies which constitute salvation for democracy. Their goal is to end, finally, the one objective of all true antifederalists, which is to ensure a cultural and political unity which enables the people, consistent with their own presumptions, to follow such policies as they wish, from age to age. Antifederalism built upon opposition to notions of final policy, politically administered, while contemporary progressives seek still the illusion of a final policy that resolves social and political contradictions.

Gordon Lloyd and I captured the Antifederalists suspicions about final policies bottomed on governmental authority in our essay "In Support of Capitalism and Democracy:"
The Antifederalists were deeply suspicious of economic and political privilege... They warned that the unlimited power over trade bestowed on Congress by the new Constitution would lead to the establishment of monopolies which, in turn, would give undue influence in government to the ambitious few... They asserted that the prosperity of the nation was best served when a large number of buyers and sellers pursued their self-interest in a market place free from the regulation and intrusion of a central government... Such power not only distorted allocation decisions and扼制了 the enterprising spirit, it also provided government with revenue for pursuing the aristocratic goals of international respect and grandeur... [And] they admitted that in the nature of things certain inequalities were unavoidable. However, necessary inequalities were acceptable if they were compensated for by the elimination of unnecessary social inequality spilling over into the political realm which would, in turn, become the foundation for legitimizing both political and social inequality as natural.

These core Antifederalist views were tied to broader social and political views in which the Antifederalists defended, essentially, an open-ended democratic process as the only just form of political association. An open-ended political process is precisely one in which the conception of legislation of the founding variety do not over-ride the preferences of ordinary citizens. Every attempt at final policy (that is, foreclosing future democratic deliberations) by contrast, is predicated on a legislative presumption that popular will shall always prove inadequate to the necessity of justice. The inverse is not applicable: there is no presumption that popular will shall always be generous and just. Rather, it is acknowledged that from place to time and place and time popular will shall

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waver, subject to generous and stingy influences. Antifederalists argued, however, that only a government organized so as to sustain the legitimate authority of that will could be just. Consequently, the practical effect, into the indefinite future that Antifederalists had to expect, was a dynamic politics that would merit variously praise as just and inclusive and criticism as unjust and exclusive.

This conception of political life poses a severe challenge to contemporary progressives, who suffer deeply by the thought of unobtainable millions who will not enjoy assured benefits beyond the "merit" benefit of a just government. In that respect they are much oriented as the founders were, although the founders spoke of unobtainable prosperity as peers rather than as beneficiaries and were content to leave to them the policy determinations which would govern their specific enjoyments.

The Politics of Doers and Sufferers

The progressives' dilemma emerged first in the most famous phrase from John F. Kennedy's inaugural address: Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.