

THAT WORD ‘OLIGARCHY’

By Michael Ventura

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On September 15, 2012, *The Economist* ran a two-paragraph item way back on p.58: Polls reported the “striking finding ... that capitalism’s reputation is severely dented. In Europe 76% of respondents felt that their economic system benefited mostly a few; 64% of Americans agreed.”

From p.58 to the headlines: This spring, right-wing EU populists made huge election gains denouncing a “technocratic elite serving the American and European financial oligarchy” (*The New York Times*, May 22).

That word “oligarchy” is getting around.

In a study to be published this fall, “... Princeton researcher Martin Gilens and Northwestern researcher Benjamin I. Page have finally put some science behind the recently popular argument that the United States isn’t a democracy any more. And they’ve found that in fact, America is basically an oligarchy. ... As Gilens and Page write, ‘the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon our public policy’ (PolicyMic.com, April 16).”

Even *The New York Times* – our stodgy gray lady of journalism – now permits its columnists the words “oligarchy” and “oligarchs.”

David Brooks: “It really doesn’t help that you have to spend your days kissing up to the oligarchs (April 24).”

Gail Collins: “The network of oligarchs [takes] advantage of our weakened campaign finance laws (May 9).”

The *Times*’ star, Nobel-winning economist Paul Krugman, headlining a column “Oligarchs and Money,” concluded: “What’s good for oligarchs isn’t good for America (April 6).” Also: “Apologists for America’s oligarchs are evidently at a loss for coherent arguments (April 24).” And: “Modern inequality isn’t about graduates. It’s about oligarchs (May 8).”

But the killer diller is Bill Moyers’ interview with Krugman (*Moyers & Company*, April 18), discussing Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. It’s one thing when a jukebox thinker like me says it; it’s a whole other ballgame when said by people with the highest Establishment cred, to wit:

Moyers: “Do you agree with [Piketty] that we are drifting toward oligarchy?”

Krugman: “Oh, yeah. Oh, I don’t think that’s even – I don’t see that there’s any question of it.”

Moyers: “What do you think it’s going to take [to stop it]? A mass uprising? Consistent demonstrations? Insurgent politics? How are we going to stem the tide that is taking us into oligarchy?”

After several sputtering sentences, Krugman bunted: “Don’t give up hope on this.”

Moyers finished with a good deal more sand: “Inequality is what has turned Washington into a protection racket for the one percent. ... The drift toward oligarchy has become a mad dash, and it will overrun us, and overwhelm us, unless we stop it.”

(Note: When Moyers wondered what might stop Oligarchy, he cited mass uprising, consistent demonstrations, and insurgent politics – not traditional party politics.)

Mr. Moyers, I have the deepest respect for you, but I must point out that what's happening is not a drift, nor a mad dash, nor will Oligarchy overrun us; Oligarchy is upon us, claw and beak, and has been for some time.

Hard to see, because it is faceless. Hard to track because it is right in front of us, posing as the capitalism Americans believe in. Hard to fight, because legislators and judges get rich doing its bidding. Hard even to think about, because it is very hard to say out loud that the American dream is a goner. We don't know how to face that -- or how to think about what comes next.

Four years ago – April 9, 2010 – I began a five-part series headlined “O Is for Oligarchy,” which described Oligarchy entrenched in America. It does me little credit to honk “oligarchy” four years before Piketty, Moyers, and Krugman. It was there to see before I saw it, but, as George Orwell wrote, “To see what is in front of one's nose is a constant struggle.”

Oligarchy has no public face, but it has a subsonic voice that hisses and speaks constantly, a direct feed to all, awake or asleep, making everybody very nervous, for we hear it under, over, and within the national discourse. This is the sound it makes:

“You are all so fucking stupid you don't know the difference between social rights and civic rights – so let gays marry and soldier, but we reserve the power to arrest any gender without warrant and detain you without trial.

“Sure, freedom of speech, speak all you like, but we have the freedom to listen in, read your emails, and make ourselves privy to your dear private lives. If we decide you need to die, we've staked out that right, too, the right to kill you, without trial, without proof, anywhere in the world (even here). No child shall be left behind, but millions of kids shall be hungry every day and we shall not allow this to be a political issue -- neither party shall give it serious attention. We may raise the minimum wage to \$10 or \$11 because that's still not enough to live on and it will keep you and your kids confined to the servile class. We'll give you medical care, so long as we can wed the finance industry to government, and make for-profit health care and Big Pharma semi-official agents of the state.

“We reserve the right to make war anywhere, anytime, in any country, without the consent of anyone, and it's not about terrorists, it's about resources, and we profit while you pay for our military.

“Hey, it was proven that the Director of National Intelligence flat-out lied to Congress, but he kept his job. Torturers kept their jobs. Hucksters kept their jobs. How secure is yours?

“You can hardly spend a cent that doesn't, sooner or later, profit us.

“Please, vote your little hearts out. Democrat Bill Clinton helped demolish finance laws that protected you since the Depression, then Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Barak Obama saved the banks and let you shift for yourselves, while both saw to the evisceration of your civic rights, leaving you, oh, very vulnerable indeed. How does it feel to be on your own, protected merely by civic practice, which the rule of law no longer backs?

“You get the program yet? A) Reassemble how capitalism works. B) Make Washington a protection racket for the one-percent. C) Eviscerate civic rights. What does that leave you with? (This ain't *The Hunger Games*. This is real life.)

“Speaking of hunger: The way we roll, tens of millions of you are on food stamps, so we’ll do good cop/bad cop. Our bad cops threaten to cut stamps, our good cops vow to save stamps, so the headlines are about their tug-of-war and not about why tens of millions will starve without food stamps.”

Turn off that voice. Turn it off. That voice talks on, but we turn it off. That’s how this happened to us. We didn’t hear. Didn’t see. Didn’t want to.

As for journalists, our job is to tell it like it is, but we tell it like it was. Most of us analyze like it’s 1994. But this is 2014. The republic has been vanquished. That’s a done deal. So: What next?

Sisters and brothers of my profession, this is for you, I’m calling you out:

The old vocabulary of a republic can’t describe today’s politics. The old capitalist vocabulary can’t describe today’s economics. Stick with those usages and, no matter your intention, you can’t help but misrepresent and lie.

Occupy Wall Street gave us the concept of the 1%. It stuck because it’s real. The faceless were identified. Those people in the street were way ahead of commentators and economists.

You must find a way to speak that is contemporary. Descriptive of what is. Real. Otherwise, what is it you’re doing?

To be obedient to the status quo is to collaborate. The question becomes, Do I collaborate with Oligarchy or do I find my way to resist?

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