

Antidemocratic Structures Unique to the United States - A historical perspective

Wednesday 2 November 2022, by [SHEPPARD Barry](#) (Date first published: 26 October 2022).

Contents

- [Institutionalized Systematic](#)
- [Other Systematic Antidemocrati](#)

The North American British colonies and then the United States carried out genocidal suppression of the Native Americans, and similar suppressions of native peoples occurred in other settler-colonial countries.

It has become more widely known in recent years that bourgeois democracy in the United States is being undermined by the Republican Party where it controls state legislatures, and threatens authoritarian rule nationally under what is known as “Trumpism” for the previous president and his followers who are the base of today’s Republican Party.

Capitalist countries that are not under outright authoritarian regimes, and have democratic rights to varying degrees are described as “bourgeois democracies” by Marxists.

The qualification denoted by the word “bourgeois” means that the capitalist class is the ruling class in those countries, and controls the state, the force ensuring capitalist rule through its laws, judiciary, prisons, armed force, etc. It has historically done this through political parties that span from social democratic parties over to right wing parties, all of which support capitalism, and the rule of the minority capitalist class.

That is true of the United States. But in the U.S. there are built-in structural anti-democratic aspects unique to it that were part of its founding and subsequent structural features that have become embedded.

Institutionalized Systematic Racism

The most important has been the oppression of African Americans. A brief overview of that history starts with the introduction of slavery by the Britain in its North American colonies, beginning in 1619 when the first captured African people were forced into slavery.

African slave labor was used in the warmest southern colonies to build up what became plantations growing sugar cane, rice, tobacco and cotton.

When the industrial revolution began in Britain in 1760, an important aspect was the growth of steam powered textile mills that were based on cotton. This greatly increased demand for cotton, and “King Cotton” became the main crop in the southernmost plantations, increasing the demand for more African slaves. The slave trade became established.

When the British colonies overthrew British rule and the United States was established in the War of Independence, 1776—1783, slavery was already firmly established.

In the 1800s, the mode of production based on slave labor slowly came into increasing conflict with the developing capitalist mode of production and industrial growth in the northern states, which attracted more immigration from Europe seeking jobs as workers.

Beginning in 1854 the government urged workers to become farmers in lands taken from Native Americans, as part of U.S. western expansion. They were replaced in the east by new immigrants from Europe.

For many reasons, slave labor depleted the soil, and the slavocracy sought to expand, including toward the west, where it came into conflict with the farmers.

In the U.S. territory of Kansas, this led to a guerrilla war by farmers against slaveowners. John Brown became a leader of the farmers, and he emerged as a leading anti-slavery fighter.

The tensions between the northern states and the South grew, as did the movement to abolish slavery by ex-slaves who had fled the plantations and Northern whites opposed to slavery. The Republican Party was formed in the North as a result.

The Democrats were the party of slavery.

When the Republican Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860 on a platform that included opposition to the expansion of slavery, the South rebelled and started the Civil War.

Marx and Engels followed the Civil War closely. Marx predicted that the North would be compelled to turn the war into a revolutionary war not only to restrict slavery to the South but to abolish it. Marx was right, and with the victory of the North, slavery was abolished.

In the brief period known as the Reconstruction of the South, former male slaves got the right to vote, and elected more than a dozen representatives to Congress and many more to state legislatures.

However, after Lincoln was assassinated near the end of the Civil War, his pro-slavery but pro-union Democratic vice president, Andrew Johnson, became president and began the process where the former owners of the slave plantations became capitalist landlords of the same plantations. Northern capitalists (with their vast loans to cotton plantation owners) were fearful of abolishing “property rights”.

In a process described by later in the 1930s by the Black militant anti-racist W.E.B. Dubois, in his book *Black Reconstruction in America*, poor whites in the South were won to support the white plantation owners by appeals to their anti-Black racism, instead of allying themselves with the freed slaves — the “color line” that has plagued U.S. labor ever since.

Sanctioned by the North, a terror campaign was unleashed against Blacks, under the Ku Klux Klan, through violence and murder and other forms of intimidation.

By 1877 the North reached agreement with the Southern capitalist landlords.

The result was the establishment of a new form of the oppression of Blacks in the counter-revolution against the Civil War known as the Jim Crow system in the South. It was also known as segregation (separation) of the races, a euphemism for oppression. In South Africa the word “apartheid” which

meant the same thing was used for the same reason.

But the counter-revolution was not limited to the South. Throughout the country, African Americans became an oppressed nationality within the capitalist United States.

The U.S. armed forces remained segregated in the two world wars. It wasn't until 1948 that they were desegregated, under pressure from the Soviet Union in the new Cold War launched by London and Washington in 1947.

The Soviets championed Black rights in the U.S., and a Soviet cause among the colored masses in revolt against their white imperialist masters in the great uprising of the colonial peoples in Asia and Africa. The U.S. sought to gain influence with these masses, and its oppression of African Americans didn't facilitate that.

In Latin America, where the U.S. dominated in the neocolonial system, resistance to U.S. imperialism also grew.

The same pressure in the Cold War led to the Supreme Court in 1954 to rule that racial segregation of the schools in the South was unconstitutional. This ruling encouraged Blacks in the South, supported by anti-racist whites (especially youth) in the North, to begin to mobilize in what quickly became a massive movement for Black civil rights.

It was not until the civil rights movement marched in the South, and the broader Black liberation movement throughout the country erupted in the 1960s, including with violent mass uprisings in the urban Black ghettos, that resulted in the overthrow of the Jim Crow system in the South and new rights for African Americans throughout the U.S.

One result was growing class differentiation among Blacks. The main gains were among a new but small Black bourgeoisie and growing middle class. The Black masses, largely working class, still bore the brunt of oppression, registered in every measure from unemployment, health care, housing segregation, to police violence.

This brings all Blacks, and by extension, all non-whites, into the system of national oppression, or by another name made popular by the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, "institutionalized, systematic racism."

A "New Jim Crow", as the title of the book by Michelle Alexander put it, developed with the fake "War on Drugs" resulting in mass incarceration and increased police violence against Blacks and Latinos, affecting the Black and Brown communities in many ways as employers rejected or restricted employment of the many millions who have passed through the prison system, and with other permanent stigmas.

Mass incarceration meant a reduction in the number of Blacks who could vote, as in almost all states felons in prison do not have the right to vote, and in many states for a time after their release, and in a few permanently.

All layers of Black people are affected by institutionalized systematic racism. Professionals and even Congress people can get pulled over while driving by the police for harassment or murder, for the "crime" of "driving while Black".

Other Systematic Antidemocratic Institutionalized Aspects of the United States

From its founding, bourgeois democracy in the United States was, and continues to be, restricted in ways not found in capitalist countries with parliamentary systems.

This is indicated by the country's very name, the United States. It isn't named like Germany, Britain, France, Australia and so forth, because its founding was the *union of states*. The national government is a federation of the states, and is often referred to as the federal government.

A major reason that the U.S. was formed as a union of the states was that in the aftermath of the revolution of 1776 against British rule, which saw the mobilization of small farmers, artisans and other popular forces, the representatives of the wealthy slave owners and Northern businessmen who wrote the Constitution feared "mob rule" by these forces.

As the foremost author, of the Constitution, James Madison, said, the property of the wealthy had to be guaranteed inviolate from encroachment by the rest of the population, and boasted that he had made sure that popular democracy was thwarted in the Constitution.

There were demands by these popular masses that led many states to refuse to support the proposed Constitution unless there were guarantees that the forms of oppression the masses suffered under British rule be explicitly rejected.

The result was the first ten amendments to the Constitution, known as the Bill of Rights, that included religious freedom, no state religion and no unreasonable searches and seizures without a warrant, no forced testimony by accused to confess, etc. all of which were oppressive policies imposed on the colonies by the British.

There was one amendment the slave states insisted upon, the Second Amendment, which assured the states had their own militias. Since there was no standing army, these militias were activated by calling up citizens, whose right to bear arms was guaranteed.

In the slave states, the function of militias was to police the slaves when necessary, to quell slave revolts, hunt down escaped slaves, and so forth.

The Second Amendment has come to be twisted by the Supreme Court to overrule any sensible restrictions on guns by the states. At the time the Constitution was adopted there were no bullets but guns were muzzle-loaded with powder and balls of lead.

There never has been a Constitutional right of all citizens to vote in the United States. The Constitution gives the decision of who gets to vote to the states.

At first, this was generally restricted to white men who owned property, including small farmers who were the bulk of the population. The franchise was extended over time by Constitutional amendments.

This was different from the French Revolution of 1789 which resulted in all citizens having the right to vote, including the peasantry whose struggle to overthrow feudalism was the backbone of the revolution.

But these amendments giving more people the right to vote were couched in negative terms. After the Civil War, for one example, an amendment was passed saying the right to vote "shall not be

denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude [slavery].”

It did not say all citizens had the right to vote. In a separate clause in the same amendment citizenship included all those born in the United States, which included Blacks.

Soon this amendment was gotten around by the Jim Crow southern states by election officials that denied Blacks the right to vote by all kinds of devices where white election officials would single out African Americans who tried to vote and made them pass ridiculous tests such as counting jelly beans in a packed jar just by looking at the jar, or other tests which they failed, according to the officials.

And any who tried to vote were also subject to terror by the Ku Klux Klan.

The Constitution reflects the reality that the union of the states is the country's fundamental structure. The House of Representatives, one of two “houses” of Congress, is composed of popularly elected representatives of each state — elected by that section of the population that has the right to vote in that state.

The more powerful “house” is the Senate, which is composed of two senators from each of the states, regardless of the size of their populations. California, with about 40 million people, has two votes, and Wyoming, with less than 600,000, has two votes in the Senate. Hardly democratic.

This favors more rural states, generally more conservative, over states with large urban populations.

Unlike in a parliamentary system, the president of the U.S. functions as both the head of state and prime minister. In the twentieth century, Congress abdicated more and more power to the presidency. Just one example: the Constitution says that only Congress can declare war. But the last time Congress did that was in 1941.

Since then the president has launched many wars, including in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and has presided over the CIA and other agencies in the executive branch in overthrowing over 50 governments.

The president has been given the sole authority to launch nuclear war.

The presidency is not elected by Congress (unlike a parliamentary system) nor by popular vote, but by an Electoral College appointed by the state legislatures.

Each state gets the number of electors of its combined number of representative and senators. Over time, state legislatures have adopted laws that their electors, pledged to certain candidates, are elected by popular vote.

But with the exception of Vermont and Maine, all each state's electors go to the party with the majority of votes, no matter how slim that majority. Combined with the institutionalized two-party system, that means that presidential election campaigns are centered on states where there are very close elections (“swing states”) that can go either way.

We have seen in recent elections candidates with a minority of the popular vote are elected. In 2020 Trump lost just enough electoral votes in “swing” states, where there were very slim majorities for Biden, to lose.

For example, in Georgia in the 2020 election, Biden won the popular vote by less than 12,000 votes,

just .23 percent of the total, and all of its electors went to Biden.

Trump pleaded with Georgia's election officials to "find" just one more vote for him than for Biden, but failed.

The institutionalization of the two party system by laws passed by both Democrats and Republicans means that third parties have almost no chance at representation in Congress, unlike the multiple parties in many parliamentary countries.

The power of the U.S. Supreme Court is unequalled in any other country. This was brought home to many people recently when the Court overturned the right to abortion, in face of a majority of people opposing that move.

In this case, the Court overturned its own 1973 ruling that legalized abortion. But the Court has the power to overturn any legislation passed by Congress, and the wording of its ruling when doing so has the force of Constitutional law.

It can also declare any executive action unconstitutional.

There is a conception called "independent legislature theory", once a fringe concept. But a case now before the Court could uphold part or all of this "theory" which includes that state legislatures can overturn that state's elections for federal offices, for either house of Congress, or the Electoral College, something Trump tried to get done but failed.

What the Supreme Court decides won't be known until its current term is over in some months.

These are just the built-in violations of bourgeois democracy in the U.S. compared to countries with parliamentary systems. Of course there are more, as in every bourgeois democracy.

Barry Sheppard
