

Reviewing Michael Parenti's "Democracy For the Few"

By [Stephen Lendman](#)

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Michael Parenti is an internationally known speaker and award winning author of 20 books and hundreds of articles. He's also a noted academic having taught at a number of colleges and universities in the US and abroad.

Parenti is also one of the nation's leading progressive political analysts and social critics. He strongly opposes US imperialism, the shredding of our civil liberties, decline of our social state, and the Bush Doctrine of preventive wars on the world for predatory capitalism's need for new markets, resources and cheap exploitable labor.

Parenti's latest book, and subject of this review, is the newly updated eight edition of one of his most noted and popular earlier ones – Democracy For the Few. In it, he shows how democracy in the nation really works. It dispels the fiction Americans are practically weaned on from birth, taught in school to the highest levels, and get daily from the dominant media.

Parenti's view is quite different from the mainstream's suppression of the "shadier sides of US political life." He explains "proponents of the existing social order have tried to transform practically every deficiency in the US political system into a strength." They want us to believe "millions of nonvoters are content with present social conditions, (and) the growing concentration of executive power is a good thing because the president is democratically responsive to broad national interests (ones affecting the public)." They tell us "exclusion of third parties" makes our system work better, and all state vices are, in fact, virtues. Those popularly presented views turn reality on its head in a nation dedicated to wealth and power interests since inception. It only ever yields a little (and grudgingly) when forced to by grassroots activism or in periods of social crisis like The Great Depression to save what elitists value most – the soul and substance corporate capitalist America.

Parenti addresses the nature of American capitalism that's the beating heart of our politico-economic system. He covers our political institutions, the "foundations and historical development of American political politics....Who governs....Who gets what, when, how and why." Central to ask is cui bono? Who benefits and who doesn't is key to his core theme showing how power, wealth and class dominate America and the notion of real democracy is pure illusion. Today, America the beautiful only exists for the privileged few and no one else. But it's always been that way in a nation ruled by rich white, predominantly Christian elitist men from birth. Parenti deconstructs our system, from its roots, in 19 incisive, thought provoking chapters, encyclopedic in depth, and up to date to the current age of George Bush neocon rule.

This review covers them all briefly to convey a full flavor of his important book, all of which

needs to be digested and understood. It's must reading and should be kept as an essential reference guide for future examination and reflection. Knowing its contents is key to arousing enough public concern for change in our own self-interest. In the age of George Bush's America, and his coterie of extremist rogues, the issue is now survival at a time a reckless leadership threatens everyone with potential nuclear or ecological Armageddon because of their lust for wealth, power and empire.

Without public awareness, angst and plain determination not to take it any more, this agenda will continue with potential consequences too disturbing to ignore. It doesn't have to happen if enough people know the danger, collectively act to defuse it in self-defense, and decide to make the country work for everyone. Parenti dedicates his book to them - "To all those who struggle for peace, social justice, and real democracy. May their numbers continue to grow."

Partisan Politics Favoring the Privileged

Privilege always counted most from the time the nation was founded. The prevailing fiction then and now is an egalitarian country "free from the extremes of want and wealth that characterized (18th century) Europe" and most parts of the world today. It was as untrue then as now with wealthy 18th century colonialists having vast disproportional land holdings and control of banking, commerce and industry, such as it was back then.

These "wealthy and powerful 'gentlemen,' our founding fathers," gathered in 1787 in the same Philadelphia State House where the Declaration of Independence was signed 11 years earlier. They came to draft a Constitution intended to last into "remote futurity" for their interests alone. Democracy for the many was not on the table in 1787.

Yet, they nominally managed to include unimaginable freedoms, up to that time, in the Bill of Rights ratified in 1791. They gave people the rights of free expression, religion, peaceable assembly, protection from illegal searches and seizures, due process and more even though it only got done through compromise after these ideas were twice rejected earlier. The delegates finally agreed out of necessity to get their document ratified and avoid a second convention some states wanted. To do it, they had to win over dissenting state representatives who wanted Bill of Rights protections for their own propertied interests.

They weren't added to the Constitution as a democratic gesture to "the people" who were nowhere in sight then or henceforth. As history later showed repeatedly, the entire Constitution was flawed from the start as governments, then and later, freely and willfully ignored and set aside these less than inviolate freedoms as Presidents Adams, Lincoln, Wilson, Johnson, Nixon, George W. Bush, and many others easily were able to do and often did.

Overall, "the Constitution was consciously designed as a conservative document" the way the framers wanted it to be. They achieved their aims with provisions in it, or omitted by intent, to "resist the pressure of popular tides" and protect "a rising bourgeoisie('s)" freedom to "invest, speculate, trade, and accumulate wealth" the way things work for capital interests today. It was to codify the law to let the country be run the way politician, jurist and nation's first Chief Supreme Court justice, John Jay, said it should be - for "The people who own the country....to run it (for their benefit alone)."

Benjamin Franklin was reportedly asked at the end of the Constitutional Convention whether

the 55 attending delegates created a monarchy or republic. He responded "A republic, if you can keep it" without acknowledging notions of an egalitarian nation were stillborn at its birth. It was true then and now in spite of all the pretense contrived to portray an idealized society, in fact, always out of reach for most in it.

This is Parenti's dominant theme – of a government, since inception, serving the privileged few at the expense of the neglected or exploited many. That's hardly a textbook definition of democracy, yet it's the model one we're taught to believe we have serving everyone equally. Parenti says his book is intended to show how vital it is for everyone to critically examine our society as a step toward improving it. He stresses a nation's greatness is measured by its freedom from "poverty, racism, sexism, exploitation, imperialism....environmental devastation," and a fundamental opposition to war and pursuit of peace everywhere. Benjamin Franklin also said "There never was a good war or bad peace," a notion unimaginable to our leaders today.

Wealth and Want in the United States Getting More Extreme

Parenti distinguishes between society's owner and worker classes with the latter paid much less than the value they create. He calls corporations "organizational devices" to exploit labor and accumulate capital with working people being society's real producers. Publicly owned corporations are the dominant institution of our time existing for one purpose only, mandated by law – to maximize the value of shareholders' equity by increasing sales and profits, securing new markets, and continuing to grow in size and dominance or be left behind. Their success is measured by their concentrated, virtual-monopoly size today. Of the world's 100 largest economies, 51 are corporations, more US-based ones than from any other country. Noam Chomsky calls them "private tyrannies."

They're run by wealthy and powerful figures comprising, along with other elites, the top 1% of the nation's affluent. Today they own 40 – 50% of the country's wealth in the form of stocks, bonds, land, natural resources, business assets and other investments. In contrast, 90% of American families have little or no net worth after mortgage and other debt burdens are taken into account. Parenti stresses America has the highest level of inequality of all developed nations, the country is rigidly structured by class, and most people die in the same class they were born into. It debunks the notion of "a land of opportunity" for everyone.

It's for CEOs who are practically deified in today's business press. They're hugely over-paid powerful figures gaining wealth at the expense of their rank and file. In 1965, they earned, on average, 24 times more than workers, in 1973 it was 45 times, in 1990 85 times, and in 2004 an astonishing 431 times as the disparity in wealth continues growing to levels economist Paul Krugman calls "unprecedented." In the last generation, worker productivity grew, but wages didn't keep up with inflation, and essential benefits declined and are disappearing. Corporations rely on downsizing and offshoring manufacturing and other high-paying jobs to cheap labor markets to reduce costs and raise profits. They maintain lean labor forces, rely heavily on part-time workers, are hostile to unions, and achieve the benefits of a huge reserve army of unemployed or underemployed to contain wage pressures.

Working people suffer the effects. Since 1999, consumer debt grew at twice the rate of their income, millions live in poverty, many more millions just above it, far more still have inadequate or no health insurance or other safety net protections, and defenseless children

and single mothers (many black and other minorities) suffer most. Parenti sums up America's dark side, unreported in the mainstream. Our nation "squanders our national resources, exploits and underpays our labor, and creates privation and desperate social needs serving the few" at the expense of the many. It mocks the notion of a egalitarian democratic society serving all its people and shames the nation for unjustifiably claiming it.

Our Plutocratic Culture Defiles Our Nominal Democracy

Parenti stresses America is a plutocracy, run predominantly by hugely affluent business people in industry and commerce, the dominant media as well as others in academia, entertainment, the clergy, and private foundations and charities. They spread the false gospel that "capitalism breeds democracy and prosperity" ignoring how democratic freedoms are incompatible with acquisitive corporate free-enterprise thriving on the exploitation of the majority everywhere.

Parenti asks "What about (forgotten) values relating to justice, health, occupational and consumer safety, regard for future generations, and accountability in government" along with concern for the environment, an educated and informed citizenry, affordable housing, worker rights, and peace on earth and an end to wars and conflict. In a "capitalist democracy," we're on our own, able to have anything if we can pay for it. The result is an enormous growing disparity between haves and have-nots and an uncaring government unwilling to help the ones in greatest need. That's "The Other America" Michael Harrington wrote about 45 years ago that aroused John Kennedy's concern in ways unimaginable in today's age of greed and imperial arrogance.

A Constitution for the Privileged Few Alone

The origins of republican America were addressed above - to create a nominally democratic government Adam Smith said should be "instituted for the defense of the rich against the poor." The nation's founders achieved mightily, handing down their legacy to succeeding generations of leaders always mindful of who gave them power and who they had to serve. At the nation's birth, only adult white male property owners could vote; blacks were commodities, not people; and women were childbearing and homemaking appendages of their husbands.

Religious prerequisites existed until 1810, and all adult white males couldn't vote until property and tax requirements were dropped in 1850. States elected senators until the 17th amendment in 1913 gave citizen voters that right, and Native Americans had no franchise in their own land until the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act gave them back what no one had the right to take away in the first place. Women's suffrage wasn't achieved until the 19th Amendment passed in 1920 after nearly 100 years of struggling for it.

The 1865 13th Amendment freed black slaves, the 1870 15th Amendment gave them the right to vote, but it wasn't until passage of the landmark Civil and Voting Rights Acts in the mid-1960s, abolishing Southern Jim Crow laws, that blacks could vote, in fact, like the Constitution said they could decades earlier. Today those rights are gravely weakened for all through unfair laws still in force and a nation growing more repressive and less responsive to the needs of ordinary working people and the nation's least advantaged. The limited high-water mark of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society has steadily eroded since in loss of civil liberties and essential social benefits.

Rise of the Corporate State that Rules Our Lives and the World

Parenti explains how, contrary to popular view, the history of America was marked by “violent class struggles, with the government” siding with “big business.” Native peoples were slaughtered for their land and resources, large landowners and corporations exploited slave labor, and limited labor rights were only won through pain and struggle. Government always sided with business interests “gorg(ing) themselves at the public trough, batten[ing] on such government handouts and protections as tariffs, subsidies, land grants, and government contracts.” Along the way, the public got pathetically little.

Governments also handed down friendly legislation and court decisions favoring wealth and power over ordinary people consigned to low wages, few or no benefits, unemployment, unsafe work conditions, child labor, poverty, and few of the rights democratic states are supposed to afford but don’t in America. It hardly mattered who was president, Democrat or Republican, Teddy Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson, William Howard Taft or Calvin Coolidge. “Silent Cal” belied his reticence proclaiming what all presidents swear allegiance to – that “The business of America is business,” and government officials, chief executives and others in high places better not forget it.

They never did, even during Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, “an era commonly believed to have brought great transformations on behalf of (what FDR called) ‘the forgotten man.’ ” Roosevelt was a patrician allied with business interests trying to save capitalism in America from meeting the same fate as in Czarist Russia in 1917. That was job one, and giving a little to save the system was a small price to pay.

It showed in the National Recovery Act (NRA) benefitting corporations by restricting production and setting minimum price requirements. “The federal housing program subsidized construction firms and loan insurance for mortgage bankers.” Price supports and production cutbacks advantaged corporate agriculture. Only faced with mass unrest were relief programs created to relieve human need. So some real democratic gains were achieved, most notably essential social welfare legislation. Key but short-lived was the passage of the landmark Wagner Act in 1935 establishing the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). It gave labor the right to bargain collectively on equal terms with management for the first time ever, an achievement the repressive 1947 Taft-Hartley Act began undoing that’s now lost altogether.

Parenti sums up the era as follows: “the New Deal era hardly adds up to a great triumph for the common people” with government mostly being responsive to the will and needs of corporate capitalism. It was true then but far more so now through “subsidies, services and protections that business could not provide for itself” and even plenty of them they can but don’t have to because government largess (with our tax dollars) does it for them.

Politics: Who Gets What? Who’s Left Out?

Parenti explains today we have a corporate state writ large with government taxing the many (the public) to subsidize the few (the privileged). This practice has been especially pernicious since WW II when the US emerged as the only dominant nation left standing. “Moderate” Republican Dwight Eisenhower gave private corporations the equivalent (in today’s dollars) of \$300 billion worth of offshore oil reserves, public lands and utilities, atomic installations and much more in what Parenti and others call “socialism for the rich.” The rest of us are on our own, sink or swim, under free-market capitalism. It’s heralded as

the American way.

Today, corporate giants get multi-billions in all kinds of handouts we pay for. They come in tax breaks, price supports, loan guarantees (many never repaid), bailouts, marketing services, export subsidies, R & D grants, free use of the public broadcasting spectrum, and huge subsidies and other government-directed benefits proving “big government” works great and business loves it. The system works by socializing costs and privatizing profits “in an enormous upward redistribution of income from the working populace to the corporate rich.”

Even the tax system works to corporate advantage with corporations today paying, on average, a tiny 7.4% of their revenues compared to 49% in the 1950s. No need asking who makes up the difference in revenue lost, but it’s even worse than that. Sixty percent of US corporations pay no income taxes, and many profitable ones get rebates. That’s reality in today’s America with government showering business with a tsunami of benefits and ordinary working people paying for them in a huge upward distribution of income now way exceeding one trillion dollars annually and rising.

The US Global Military Empire Threatens Everyone

The US emerged from WW II as the world’s dominant superpower. Today it’s the only one, and it throws its weight around recklessly proving it. First, it spends more on the military than all other nations combined. It has many hundreds of military bases worldwide including many secret ones that by some unofficial estimates number around 1000 large, medium and smaller ones. In Iraq alone in May, 2005, the Pentagon acknowledged having 106 bases including permanent super ones the size of small towns with all their amenities included.

Further, the US is recklessly embarked on new super-weapons building programs, including nuclear ones, in defiance of arms control and reduction and other treaties it renounces unilaterally. It’s aim is “full spectrum dominance” of all land, surface and sub-surface sea, air, space, electromagnetic spectrum and information systems with intent to fight preventive wars of aggression against any potential challengers to its status as lord and master of the universe.

Money is no object or restraint toward this aim with the Pentagon unable to account for multi-billions annually from waste, fraud and abuse no one in government cares about. After all, it’s taxpayer money payouts to corporate fraudsters in lieu of funding essential public services and having regard for environmental protections. It’s spent on a reckless imperial agenda claimed for national security at home and to spread democracy abroad to nations having none. In fact, it’s what Parenti calls “defending the capitalist world from social change” – even the peaceful and democratic kind seen as a threat to corporate interests.

Since WW II, it’s been a US-led “global bloodletting” through wars of aggression, CIA-instigated coups and political assassinations, and supporting a rogue’s gallery of S.O.B. tyrants as long as they’re our S.O.B.s. The list of them earlier and now is near-endless. They serve the US empire well and its corporate giants hugely at the expense of ordinary people everywhere. Parenti rightfully calls America “the greatest imperialist power in world history.” It’s also the greatest of all threats to humanity from possible nuclear or environmental Armageddon.

Health and Human Services – Victims of Corporate Capitalism

Parenti explains even plutocratic rulers have to make concessions at times, but for the last generation hard won earlier gains have eroded. He names some of them:

- the WIC program aiding women, infants and children;
- AFDC aid to needy families with dependent children wiped out by Clinton's welfare reform;
- SSI supplemental income for the blind, disabled and low income persons;
- food stamps;
- child nutrition help and school lunch program;
- nursing home assistance for indigent elderly;
- legal services for the poor;
- remedial education;
- maternal and child health care;
- student grants and other aid;
- drug treatment;
- Medicare and Medicaid reductions, and much more.

The result is "more hunger, isolation, unattended illness," homelessness, untreated illness and more "for those with the fewest economic resources and the least political clout."

The picture's even bleaker with states and private charities unable to make up for what Washington eliminates, and rising costs of essential services like health care means tens of millions unable to afford what everyone must have. The plutocrats' solution: privatize everything including the most successful government poverty-reducing program ever - Social Security. For now, efforts to do it stalled, but the scheme won't go away. Wall Street is drooling over the possibility of getting a huge cut out of what seniors, "survivors," and the disabled badly need in retirement and/or supplemental income. The plutocratic sharks will be back trying again to steal what they haven't gotten so far.

Parenti covers other areas where public need and welfare are sacrificed to plutocratic greed - occupational safety, ergonomic standards, untested chemicals and additives in foods, factory farms polluting ground water, minimum wages kept low in spite of the recent inadequate increase taking 10 years to get, disappearing low-cost housing, and education falling victim to reduced funding and efforts to let private pirates teach our kids wanting only to profit most by doing the least.

Then, there's what Parenti calls "mess transit." Mass transit rails efficiency and low fuel consumption got Big Oil and Big Auto to doom the system, another victim of plutocratic greed. It got us dirty air, global warming, 42,000 annual needless highway deaths and huge numbers of accidents and injuries, clogged highways, congested inner-cities, and an enormous expense to many car owners struggling to afford what many wouldn't need if

efficient mass transit served them. Parenti's conclusion – "Once again public service was treated as something to be eliminated rather than be improved." The public ends up the loser.

The Last Environment Becoming the Lost One

Parenti explains privilege and power give plutocrats the right to "expropriate and use....whatever natural resources" they want, "while passing off their diseconomies (or externalities) onto others." He means maximizing profit and minimizing costs by dumping huge amounts of deadly toxins on land, in water, and in the air. Corporate giants are licensed to strip mine rapaciously, clear-cut forests, turn rain forests in wastelands, harm natural species and wildlife, erode topsoil by harmful chemical farming, sell unsafe and untested foods and drugs, destroy the ozone layer, increase global warming, and threaten human health and welfare, all for the sake of greater profits.

For their crimes, "corporate polluters are more often rewarded than punished" with lucrative contracts to clean up the mess they made. They gain at public expense twice over. They're allowed to foul the environment, then get us to pay the cost "for the private sector's diseconomies." The alternate approach is obvious but untaken because it's bad for business. So Parenti concludes "An infinitely expanding capitalism and fragile, finite ecology are on a calamitous collision course. Our very survival hangs in the balance." But for corporate predators, that's someone else's problem after they're gone.

Unequal before the Law Favoring Elites

Crime in the suites prevails in America because the law is usually written and enforced "to favor the very rich over the rest of us." Put another way, the rule of law depends on who it's intended for or aimed against. Corporate crime is far more costly in lives and money than crimes on streets. Even worse, what's uncovered is the tip of the iceberg, and the worst corporate crimes go unpunished – exploiting people everywhere for profit, fouling the environment, and profiting hugely from destructive wars. Then there's growing mass poverty from neoliberal globalized trade; turning a blind eye to corporate complicity in drugs trafficking; money laundering; underpaying employees; union busting; waste, fraud and abuse on government contracts generally ignored; insider trading rarely caught or prosecuted, and more and more.

In contrast, steal a few tomatoes to feed your hungry kids and face stiff prison terms, and do it three times in states like California and many others and get life sentences. In an age of neocon rule, it's hardly surprising the Supreme Court ruled 5 – 4 in March, 2003 such harsh sentences don't violate the Constitution's Eight Amendment prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. Parenti cites the cases of a Virginia man sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for stealing 87 cents and a Houston youth getting an incredible 50 years for robbing two people of a dollar.

A nation treating its people this way is one gone mad by its brazen defiance of democratic justice exposed as a pipe dream for ordinary people and an impossible one for the least advantaged, people of color and anyone happening to be Muslim in an age of the concocted "war on terrorism." Then there's the other phony "war on drugs" that's just an ugly scheme to fill prison cells, take restless minorities off the streets so they don't get more restless, and build a huge criminal justice system as another avenue for profit. Those homeland wars and the long-standing one on the poor and least advantaged left the US with the largest prison

population in the world at 2.2 million that's rising by 1000 new inmates weekly.

It's the shame of the nation and was the subtitle this writer used in 2006 for an in-depth article called "The US Gulag Prison System" referring to the one at home. Everyone pays for it including taxpayers and the mothers and children left behind on their own to fend for themselves. Not the families of corporate fraudsters, however, whose offending members rarely serve time if caught, do it in country club prisons if they do, and get short sentences and affordable fines made easier by automatic early releases.

Then there are government criminals caught, tried and convicted. They just enter the presidential commutation and pardon queue awaiting their turn, like I. Lewis Libby, that usually comes up before they ever serve a day in soft-on-crime prisons. In America, it's called justice. In this review, it's called outrageous.

Political Repression and National Security Under Police State Rules

Parenti puts it this way: "The corporate-dominated state is more sincerely dedicated to fighting dissent than fighting organized crime" including in the suites where the worst of it's committed. So we have the FBI, CIA, NSA, IRS, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and NORTHCOM protecting the rich by coming down hard on the rest of us if we have "dangerous thoughts" or support "peace and social justice organizations." Corporations can fire employees with the "wrong political opinions." Secret courts can order secret surveillances, render secret decisions and keep no published records.

We can be wiretapped; illegally searched; have our possessions seized; and now declared an "enemy combatant," denied due process and sacred habeas corpus rights, and "renditioned" to a torture-prison hellholes for indefinite incarceration and trial by a military tribunal with no right of appeal or legitimate access to proper legal help. That's today's America where anyone disagreeing with George Bush can end up a political prisoner in a nation claiming to have none. We've always had them with shameful examples to prove it like Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) leaders like Big Bill Haywood who had to leave the country to avoid serving time, others in the IWW, socialist leader Eugene Debs, and radicals Sacco and Vanzetti made to pay for crimes they never committed.

Then there were WW II and Korean War resisters arrested for their beliefs and 120,000 law-abiding Japanese Americans sent to US-based concentration camps because of their ancestry in time of war with the country most were never born in. There was repressive legislation going back to John Adams' Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 criminalizing dissent in his day. There was Woodrow Wilson's Espionage and Sedition Acts that were just as punitive. There was the 1940 Smith Act making anti-capitalist dissent a crime. There were jailings of African American leaders in the civil rights struggles, and today there are mass witch-hunt roundups and unlawful detentions of Muslims because of their faith and Latino immigrants persecuted twice over. Destructive trade agreements like NAFTA destroyed their livelihoods, forcing them here for work unavailable at home. Then, once here, they're treated like criminals if caught or ruthlessly exploited by employers as virtual serfs.

There were Black Panther leaders murdered in their sleep like Fred Hampton, Jr. in Chicago and others imprisoned on spurious charges like Geronimo Pratt (now a free man after being held 20 years in jail unjustly). There's Mumia Abu-Jamal framed for a murder he didn't commit, denied due process, confined to prison on death row for the past 25 years still hoping for a new trial to vindicate himself. There were American Indian Movement leaders

like Leonard Peltier also framed for a murder he didn't commit and still incarcerated after 30 years. Add to these, Puerto Rican nationalists, peace and environmental activists, and others still fighting for their civil rights and right to dissent.

In all the above instances, "unworthy" victims paid for the crimes of their "worthy" victimizers. Parenti documents these and other examples of a repressive state apparatus protecting the rich from their exploited victims daring to resist. He sums it up saying "under the guise of 'fighting communism, fighting terrorism, protecting US interests, keeping us safe, or defending democracy, the purveyors of state power have committed horrendous crimes against the (innocent) people of this and other countries, violating human rights and the Constitution....to make the world safe for profit, privilege, and pillage." It's called democracy-American-style.

Who Governs? For Whom? Who Has No Say?

Who else? Those controlling society's wealth "exercise trusteeship over educational institutions, foundations, think tanks, publications, (and) mass media" as well as having political and economic power over the nation's business. The ruling class is comprised mainly of wealthy white, Judeo-Christian corporate elites whose mission it is "to secure the interests of the wealthy class."

That means relations with labor are quite the opposite and quite successful with union membership currently around 12% overall and only 7.4% in the private sector. That's down from its post-war 1950s peak of 34.7%. Today, organized labor is at its lowest ebb since the beginning of the mass unionization struggles of the 1930s and in the private sector in over 100 years. It's because of Democrat and Republican hostility to organized labor as well as corporations threatening plant closures and outsourcing forcing pay and benefit cuts and unions to lose out overall. The situation is grim with wealth and power firmly in charge and ordinary working people losing out. There's no mystery about how to fix the problem. But it can only happen through mass collective action by organized people confronting organized money. There's a lot more of us than them.

It's not easy, however, in an age of glorified globalization promoting the phony notion it lifts all boats. Ralph Nader explains the rising tide only lifts all yachts at a time corporate giants' power is immense. It exceeds the rights of all sovereign states they operate in making them the ones that rule the world. They do it with one-sided unfair "free trade" agreements like NAFTA and DR-CAFTA. They and the World Trade Organization (WTO) super-state have power to "override or dilute any laws of any nation deemed to burden" corporate capital. WTO rules deny their sovereignty when it conflicts with corporate-mandated trade rules written for them. No sovereign right is sacred and none can interfere even in cases of harmful products and services member nations aren't allowed to prohibit. Secret WTO panels alone have the final say in trade disputes that always side with business because that's where their ruling members come from.

Meanwhile, the Constitution is null and void even though its preamble nominally states power rests with the people, not a corporate-run trade body making secret rulings putting its members above the law of the land. Parenti calls this "a coup d'etat by international finance capital....a logical extension of imperialism, a victory of empire over republic (and) corporate capital over democracy" that our own government does nothing to counteract because it supports these practices. It's not supposed to be that way, or so we learned in school. But that's how it is and won't change until we end "free trade" and replace it with

trade that's "fair" for "the interests of the many rather than the greed of the few." We have miles to go and haven't even begun the journey.

The Shame of the Mass Media That's A Mess

Corporate giants rule the nation, the world and the nation's dominant means of communicating to the people through the mass media using public airwaves and the large print publications they control. In that capacity, they're the nation's thought control police gatekeepers filtering in information they want reported and suppressing what's hostile to state and corporate interests. Today, they're more able than ever to do it. Since 1983, the number of corporations controlling most newspapers, magazines, book publishers, movie studios, and electronic media shrunk from 50 to six global media Goliaths – Time Warner, Disney, General Electric, Viacom, Germany-based Bertelsmann, and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. Add to them cable giant Comcast and it's a not so "magnificent seven."

Their owners decide what's aired and what isn't and news reporters, commentators and so-called pundits know the rules. If someone forgets, they'll end up in newspaper Siberia reporting obits or on TV off-camera at best, not on it. Those playing by the rules aren't cheated, however, even though they cheat us. On TV especially, many earn handsome salaries, good benefits and lucrative speaking engagements and book deals. Lying for the state and corporate bosses pays well. It's why the queue is long with many in it awaiting their chance for a big payday. Those of conscience and progressive leanings need not apply. Few get space in print or on-air except as setup patsies matched against hoards of conservative ideologues preaching wars are good and corporations free to pillage and plunder will make the world safe for democracy. Their job is to spread the "proper" message that excludes lots of ugliness harmful to ordinary people they ignore.

There is hope, however, and it shows up in alternate media spaces – on progressive web sites, like the one you're on now, and on small and independent radio and some TV in cities throughout the country where this writer airs a weekly "News and Information Hour" that tells the truth in-depth with noted guests. They need support and space to grow, and that's where the listening public comes in. They and we also need to join the struggle to save the last frontier of press freedom – to preserve Net Neutrality and keep this space out of predatory corporate media hands that want to control. They can't be allowed to get it nor will they if enough people-power unites to prevent it. At stake is what remains of a free, open and independent media. We can't afford to lose it to corporate giants wanting to take away what belongs to us.

Our Corrupted Electoral Process

It almost understates the problem saying our "electoral process is in need of serious rescue and repair." In large measure, it's on life-support barely hanging on and is now little more than theater in a nominal democracy serving the privileged alone. They make the rules in a dominant two-party duopoly, effectively keep out interloper alternative choices. While differences between both sides exist, on one issue they're united. They're both committed to waging imperial wars for predatory corporate capital's right to exploit workers, gain new markets, control the world's resources, and rule it without challenge. Unless that changes, whichever party wins elections won't matter. Neither one will serve popular interests, only privileged ones.

Our electoral system is structured to make it near impossible for both dominant parties to

lose to a third party surprise. We have “winner take all” elections artificially magnifying major parties’ strengths. Whichever party gets a plurality of votes (even if not a majority) wins 100% representation so parties on the short end getting lesser vote totals in congressional districts get no representation for their supporters. If we had a proportional representation system, it would be different as party representation would match the percent of votes it won.

Redistricting, as a function of decennial reapportionment, rigs the system as well especially when its most extreme gerrymandering method is used to maximize party strength in how district lines are drawn. Then there’s the issue of campaign funding and where most of it comes from. It’s not from the public supporting people-oriented candidates. It’s from powerful corporate donors for candidates supporting their interests, and the amounts contributed are huge. They’re in unrestricted soft money amounts to parties and evasions of the \$5000 limit per candidate by donating in names of other family members, relatives, staff, the corner grocer or anyone else for the multi-millions needed for federal and many state elections today. All donations come with strings. We all know what they are and what’s expected of winning candidates.

Then there’s the issue of who gets to vote most people thought was settled long ago, but tell that to adult citizens in poor black and Latino districts and they’ll say otherwise. Many are peremptorily stricken from the rolls the way many black voters in Florida were cheated in the 2000 elections. The same thing goes on in many states, it’s illegal, but it happens anyway, and if discovered ex post facto it’s too late to matter – case closed. In addition, 4.5 million Americans can’t vote because of past criminal records, or they’re currently in prison.

Then there’s the issue of election theft in a nation where foxes now guard the henhouse under a system of privatized elections with more than 80% of 2004 votes cast and counted on corporate-owned electronic voting machines. Three Republican-supporting large corporations own, program, operate and count the votes using machines with no paper ballot receipts. The process makes it impossible to verify vote totals through recounts that will only produce the first total gotten, real or corrupted. It also makes a mockery of free, fair and open elections.

The process now is secretive and unreliable run by private interests with everything to gain if their candidates win. Based on clear evidence, that’s exactly what’s happening and will continue to until these machines are banned and independent civil servants run elections free from outside interference and do it with paper ballots counted by hand and saved. The way elections are run now, it’s easy rigging the outcomes threatening to make our two-party monopoly “an even worse one-party tyranny” the way it’s been under George Bush Republican rule with Democrat complicity helping out.

The Best Congress Money Can Buy with Its Members Having Plenty of Their Own

Parenti explains our founders created a system of checks and balances by separating government into executive, legislative and judicial branches, even though the idea sounded better than it actually was. Today it’s barely noticeable with two branches overtly supporting the chief executive’s right to do as he pleases with no effective check on his power or lawlessness. One reason is because of who gets to Congress and the courts. They’re mostly plutocracy members in good standing there to take care of their own. Half of Senate members are millionaires, and one critic believes the lower body is more “a House of Lords” than a House of Representatives.

They're connected in an incestuous relationship with business and high-powered influence peddling lobbyists offering "succulent campaign contributions, fat lecture fees, easy-term loans (sometimes forgotten), pre-paid vacation jaunts, luxury resorts, four-star restaurants," choice seats at major sporting events and other monetary and other inducements for easily corrupted officials quick to sell their votes and integrity for the office they want to win and hold onto. It's all legal so long as explicit promises aren't made in exchange for money or monetary favors. Even when they are, few offenders are caught with exceptions like lobbyist Jack Abramoff and Representative Duke Cunningham and others long forgotten in the past. The scoundrels come from Congress, the administration, states, police and one vice-president.....so far.

Richard Nixon got off by resigning and getting Gerald Ford to pardon him as part of a shameless deal likely struck in advance with a willing seeker of the nation's highest office. So did Ronald Reagan for the Iran-Contra scandal and his vice-president, GHW Bush. Future judgment awaits the son for his crimes, far exceeding the father's that alone were pretty egregious as part of the Bush crime family's way of operating and, so far, getting off scott free.

It makes it hard imagining legislators will hold him or others accountable that's made no easier by the way Congress is structured. It's in about 20 standing committees, numerous subcommittees and chairmen of each with enough influence to make or block things from happening unless they goes against congressional consensus. So deals like NAFTA, "welfare reform," and the 1996 telecom giveaway were pretty much baked in the cake, and no committee chairman dared try blocking them.

Parenti explains how the "legislative labyrinth" affects the work of Congress, how staggered Senate terms of office blunt sweeping sentiment changes, and how the very structure of Congress keeps it conservative and supportive of privilege, not the electorate. He notes "legislative democracy (is) under siege," held virtual hostage by "the entire corporate social order" with its control of the nation's wealth, mass media, and whole network of powerful figures working for its interests. Under Republican/Bush neocon rule, it's even worse today from "reactionary forces within the legislature itself." Secrecy prevails, public interest is discarded, the rule of law is what the chief executive says it is, and free, open and fair elections are an illusion under a system where wealth and power choose the candidates and often determine who wins before voters go to the polls.

Hail to the Chief Executive

Along with his other roles as chief executive and commander in chief, the president is also the lead "promoter and guardian of global corporate capitalism," not democracy as we're made to believe. In this capacity, he surrounds himself with a coterie of corporate leaders and advisors from industry, Wall Street and other key areas of business with a dog in the fight to keep the world safe for capital.

Another key presidential role is being the nation's "chief liar." It involves preaching restraint while supporting extremes, saying tax cuts benefit ordinary people when they're earmarked for the rich and corporate giants, professing to be a peacemaker while preparing for war, and claiming to be an education president and friend of the earth while slashing funding for both to give big handouts to corporate friends who don't care about societal betterments.

Parenti covers much more in this section including "a loaded Electoral College" overriding

the popular vote when the two disagree and individual Electors free to vote against the candidate “to whom they had been pledged.” He also notes how presidents today are “would-be kings.” They usurp powers far beyond what the Constitution allows like taking the nation to war when its Article I arrogates that authority solely to Congress. He freely uses executive privilege as well through executive orders, signing statements, emergency war powers and more that for George Bush means claiming “unitary executive” authority (unmentioned in the Constitution) to ignore the law and do as he pleases.

Parenti sums it up saying “executive power....advances the process of ‘free-market’ capital accumulation.” Whoever occupies the White House, there won’t “be much progressive change from the top....unless there is also mass social unrest and mobilization for fundamental reforms at the (grassroots) base. Until then, presidents will pursue their prerogatives and their (imperial) wars.”

Bureaucracy in American Politics

Bureaucracy exists in all parts of society, public and private, but the government kind we’re told is inefficient and should be minimized. It’s so private interests can run everything because they supposedly do it better. Baloney. Unmentioned is private interests represent themselves, not society. That’s why we need government in place serving everyone in ways private business won’t because doing it hurts profits. The record makes the case. HMOs and other health insurance providers love healthy customers but discard the seriously ill; privatized, unregulated water and other utilities gouge their customers as much as they can get away with; and government-run Social Security is the most effective of all retirement programs for most people compared to private pension plan promises made and now abandoned by growing numbers of companies to save money.

Government also does what private business can’t or won’t like running the “much maligned post office” delivering first class mail anywhere in the country for 41 cents an ounce. It used to run a more efficient military until it privatized services in it, including 100,000 hugely overpaid paramilitary mercenaries, not the 30,000 phony number told the public. The changes accomplish nothing besides running up a big bill for taxpayers in a massively bloated and growing military budget that includes tens of billions off the books and mostly out of sight.

Much is done secretly with Congress helping administrations wage illegal wars, practice malfeasance and get away with all of it untouched because they’re all in on the schemes. It ends up breeding a culture of unaccountability, waste, corruption, lawlessness, and no one’s the wiser unless something important slips out by mistake. When it comes from whistleblowers, they’re condemned and threatened making coming forward honorably a risk to their careers or worse in an atmosphere where dissent means supporting terrorism.

Parenti also explains how watchdog agencies like FDA, FCC, EPA, OSHA and others protect the industries they’re supposed to monitor and regulate more than ever. So FCC supports further industry consolidation; EPA ignores dirty air, polluted groundwater and global warming; and FDA allows untested drugs and unsafe foods to be sold to consumers. These and other watchdog agencies promote profits, not the public interest or safety, and they’re staffed by corporate foxes guarding our henhouse.

Public authority is also placed in private hands with federal lands, forests, water and other resources given to corporate interests. Then there’s the so-called Federal Reserve System

created in 1913 by Congress through one of their most outrageous and disastrous pieces of legislation ever, robbing the public welfare to enrich greedy bankers.

The System is a privately-owned for profit enterprise, not a government-run one as most people falsely believe. It illegally gave bankers authority Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution arrogates solely to Congress – the power to create and control the nation's money supply they use to charge government interest on its own money. In its near-94 year existence, this banking cartel pulled off the largest ever financial heist in world history by far. The Federal Reserve Act gave private bankers power to transfer wealth from government to profiteers with the public paying for it through taxes. In a 2006 article titled "Dirty Secrets of the Temple," this writer explained how they did it, how the system works, and the horrific consequences.

It was mentioned what Parenti covers as well about Jack Kennedy's displeasure with the scheme that may have cost him his life. He wanted to end the Federal Reserve System to eliminate the national debt central bankers create by printing public money and loaning it to the government. On June 4, 1963, he issued presidential order EO 11110 giving the president authority to issue currency and ordered the US Treasury to print \$4 billion worth of silver-backed "United States (Treasury) Notes" notes for starters replacing Federal Reserve (banking cartel) ones. Months later he was dead, and Lyndon Johnson rescinded his order.

Abraham Lincoln met the same fate that may have resulted from his getting Congress to pass the Legal Tender Act in 1862. It empowered the US Treasury to issue paper money called "greenbacks" so the government had its own money for the Civil War and didn't have to pay greedy bankers 24 – 36% interest they demanded for loans Lincoln needed. Right after the war ended, Lincoln was assassinated, the so-called Greenback law was rescinded shortly thereafter, and a new national banking act was passed making all money interest-bearing again.

The US "Supremes"

Parenti calls the Supreme Court an "aristocratic branch" of government as its members are appointed, serve for life and have great power for good or ill. They're also well paid and "enjoy expensive gifts and lavish trips paid for by corporations and other affluent interests" courting influence and getting it. High Court justices most always side with corporate America, and their decisions show it. Today, it's more obvious than ever with Court ideology conservative to reactionary (no liberals among them) in support of business and authoritarian government. But even well into the New Deal era in the 1930s, "the Supreme Court was the activist bastion of laissez-faire capitalism" that White House and public pressure finally changed by 1937 to get the Court to accept New Deal legislation.

Parenti explains how High Courts "opposed restrictions on capitalist power (overall), but supported restrictions on the civil liberties of persons who agitated against that power." In the past and now, "the Court treated the allegedly pernicious quality of a radical idea as evidence of its lethal efficacy and as justification for its suppression." So it was possible to convict communists or socialists under the Smith Act even though they only advocated a different economic system, not the forcible overthrow of the government that would be a crime. Dissenting ideas and beliefs are lawful under the First Amendment's right of free expression, but often in the past and now people exercising their constitutional right pay a stiff price, and Supreme and other courts go along.

Parenti points out “the threat of revolution in the United States has never been as real or harmful as the measures taken to ‘protect’ us from revolutionary ideas.... The real danger comes from those at the top who would insulate us from ‘unacceptable’ viewpoints. No idea is as dangerous as the force that seeks to repress it.” When the nation’s courts are part of that force, freedom in a nominally democratic state is on shaky ground.

Parenti explains the High Court reflects “the climate of the times and....the political composition of the justices” although most often the Court leans to the right supporting the corporate state and conservative issues. It reflects its ideology in its decisions and by the cases it chooses to hear or not hear.

The Warren Court was an exception ruling for the first time ever “repeatedly on behalf of the less affluent” on civil liberties, reapportionment of legislative districts, and extending the “economic rights of the poor.” The Court ended state prohibitions against interracial marriage and rendered its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 ruling “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” that was a first step toward ending racially separated schools it took until the 1960s to move forward on.

Parenti continued saying post-Warren Courts reverted to form leaning “mostly in a rightward direction” on a variety of crucial issues he lists and discusses like:

- abortion and gender discrimination making positive and negative rulings;
- affirmative action and civil rights making it harder to prove discrimination;
- criminal justice weakening Miranda rights, giving child abusers more rights than their victims, weakening unreasonable searches and seizures and much more;
- the death penalty with the High Court reinstating it in 1976 but “pruning” it down thereafter;
- economic inequality by upholding laws reducing welfare aid and other rulings against the disadvantaged;
- the electoral system that was highlighted in *Bush v. Gore* ruling against the candidate who won and awarding it (as it turned out) to the loser;
- executive power, granting more of it to the president;
- labor and the corporate economy ruling often for business and against working Americans;
- the separation of church and state with the Court disregarding the First Amendment to rule for religious organizations’ exemptions to taxation and much more in violation of the Constitution at a time Christian hard right extremists wield enormous influence over state policy.

Parenti’s book was published in March, 2007 before the current Court’s June rulings came down, but he surely would have commented on them had he known in time. Overall, the Court affirmed how hard line it is confirming what progressives feared most about it. Call it a muscular move to the right on fundamental issues of free expression, abortion rights and more.

One decision was a 5 – 4 ruling with the Court allowing the political process to become even more corrupted by corporate money by allowing ads mentioning specific candidates to appear in the immediate days before an election. It means funding an electoral campaign just went up exponentially so lesser or poorly funded candidates have even less of a chance to win. In another decision, hypocritically, it curtailed the free expression rights of public school children because they said things the Court didn't like.

Even more troubling was the effective gutting of the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision affirming segregated public schools denied "Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14th Amendment." The reactionary Roberts Court disagreed 5 – 4 saying instead public schools can't seek to achieve or maintain integration through measures taking explicit account of a student's race. The decision angered conservative Justice Breyer enough to emotionally denounce it in a 20 minute statement from the bench calling it a "radical" step and "It is not often in the law that so few have so quickly changed so much." Justice Stevens bristled as well saying it was "a cruel irony (that the opinion) rewrites the history of one of this court's most important decisions (and) no member of (the 1975 Court he joined) would have agreed with (it)."

One other disturbing trend was the Court's placing limits on plaintiffs' ability to bring suits or appeal them. It bothered Yale Law School Professor Judith Resnik enough to label the just-ended term "the year they closed the courts."

Parenti would be bothered, too, although his book stresses Courts reflect the political climate of the times and notes justices not only read the Constitution but also newspapers. When, like today, the Court and president are "militantly conservative" and Congress is complicit, justices can be inordinately activist siding against the public interest. Since they have life tenure, their jobs are secure, and the dominant media hushes up their abuses. Parenti suggests a way to "trim judicial adventurism is to end life tenure for federal judges," including those on the High Court. However, a constitutional amendment is needed to do it, and that's extremely hard to get.

Democracy for the Few in America

In our "pluralistic democracy," most government policies favor the privileged and work against the great majority of ordinary people. The result is social inequities and injustices prevail, civil liberties are fast disappearing, the rich get richer, the middle class is eroding, poverty and human needs are growing, and our government and dominant media say we live in the best of all possible countries in the best of all possible worlds in the USA. The preceding chapters dispelled that notion in disturbing detail so there's no confusion how things really are, and rosy characterizations won't change anything for most of us.

With all its faults, its defenders say "democratic capitalism" (an oxymoron) evolved through gradual reform. Though true at times, most often an unempowered unmobilized public is no match for the power of corporate capital with government and the military allied with it. Parenti asks:

— "How can we speak of the US politico-economic system (reflecting) the democratic will?"

— What democratic mandate directed government to transfer wealth from the people to the rich;

- to lavish huge subsidies on corporate giants;
- to fight imperial wars for greater corporate profit-making opportunities;
- to endanger our environment;
- to serve the privileged alone at the expense of all others it shows contempt for;
- to roll back democracy when there's too much of it so there's only enough for the privileged few. Unless and until that changes America the Beautiful will, in fact, be George Bush's ugly America for most of us.

As Parenti says in summing up, it's "no mystery what needs to be done to bring us to a more equitable and democratic society" citing specifics like:

- aid needy farmers, not rich agribusiness;
- promote conservation and ecological restoration;
- promote efficient mass transit, not inefficient polluting autos, one-fourth of which now are gas-guzzling, hugely greenhouse gas-emitting, road hogging, behemoth, dangerous SUVs no one knew they needed until Madison Avenue geniuses convinced millions they couldn't live without them;
- reintroduce a fair progressive tax system and eliminate benefits only the rich get;
- restore trust-busting and break up the corporate giants; promote the notion that small and local are good and big and global bad;
- abolish the banking cartel-owned Federal Reserve so the government can print and circulate its own money and not have to pay private predators interest on it;
- end powerful monied interests controlling the electoral process; promote public financing supporting all candidates; abolish the Electoral College and our winner take all system; abolish electronic voting and reintroduce paper ballots counted by hand by civil servants running elections; grant the District of Columbia statehood and full representation in Congress.
- establish a minimum livable wage and guaranteed income for the indigent;
- promote full employment and the right to organize and bargain on equal terms with management;
- institute abandoned or reduced social services starting with those most important and for those in greatest need but made available to everyone;
- guarantee quality national health and dental care for all and care for the elderly and indigent;
- establish free education for everyone to the highest levels;
- pay for it by ending imperial wars and promoting peace, slashing bloated military and homeland security budgets, closing hundreds of unneeded foreign-based military

installations and most at home, ending expensive weapons systems development, and cutting the size of the military to levels needed for homeland defense, not imperial adventurism.

- end gender, racial, ethnic and religious discrimination and criminal justice inequities;

- abolish the CIA, NSA and other secretive, hugely expensive, roguish spy agencies operating outside the law no democratic state should allow; abolish DHS that functions as a national Gestapo;

- return the public airwaves to its rightful owner – the public and open them up fully to all views on all issues with no corporate or government censorship;

- enable seniors, the poor and disabled to have a minimum living income adjusted for inflation with an equitable Social Security program for everyone paid for by a progressively fair tax system, not the regressive payroll tax one now in place letting the rich off the hook by burdening average and low-wage earners;

- establish public ownership over the major means of production in a true social democracy. Market forces only work for the ones controlling them assuring they benefit by exploiting most others. That's not a radical idea. It's plain fact.

Parenti concludes saying "Our goal should be an egalitarian, communitarian, environmentally conscious, democratic socialism (or real social democracy), with a variety of participatory and productive forms, offering both security and democracy" for everyone, not just the few the way it is now. "There is nothing sacred about the existing system." Having failed the many, it should be replaced by an alternative one that works for everyone.

It can happen with a "fundamental change (to) widespread organizing not only around particular issues but for a movement" for sweeping democratic change. Perhaps the time will come, Parenti says, as it did in the past, "when those who (today) seem invincible will be shaken from their pinnacles" and revealed to have feet of clay when disrobed and exposed to the light of day. We'll all then see they represented "democracy for the few," not the rest of us, but their day is past and replaced by a new social order for everyone. That can happen if enough people believe it and mobilize effectively to get it. A later Parenti edition could then be called "The End of Democracy for the Few – How the Many Triumphed Over the Privileged."

Stephen Lendman lives in Chicago and can be reached at lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net.

Also visit his blog site at sj.lendman.blogspot.com and listen to The Steve Lendman News and Information Hour on www.TheMicroEffect.com Saturdays at noon US central time.

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About the author:

Stephen Lendman lives in Chicago. He can be reached at lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net. His new book as editor and contributor is titled "Flashpoint in Ukraine: US Drive for Hegemony Risks WW III."

<http://www.claritypress.com/LendmanIII.html> Visit his blog site at sjlendman.blogspot.com. Listen to cutting-edge discussions with distinguished guests on the Progressive Radio News Hour on the Progressive Radio Network. It airs three times weekly: live on Sundays at 1PM Central time plus two prerecorded archived programs.

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