Princeton makes it official — USA Has Become Oligarchy, No Democracy

American media is fond of speaking about “Russian Oligarchs” as if Russia were the only nation that allowed accumulation of such unprecedented wealth. The Yeltsin days of dis-order and collapse indeed saw the rapid rise of many fortunes and oligarchs—persons of very much wealth. Some of them have proven patriotic citizens, some like Khodokorvsky or the late unlamented Boris Berezovsky proved to be loveless gangsters. A new study, however by a Princeton University Professor of the influence of very wealthy or economically powerful persons on American political policies makes clear for the first time that a genuine American Oligarchy has staged a slow coup d’etat over US foreign and domestic policy over the past three decades since the era of Ronald Reagan. This American oligarchy today is the major force for war and dis-order across the planet.

I completed by undergraduate university studies in one of America’s most elite universities, Princeton. It was during the early 1960’s and classmates came from elite preparatory private schools like Andover or Exeter. Classmates with names like Firestone or Prince Faisal were attending. Then tuition cost $650 a year, the price I paid for my used 1956 Chevy. I was only able to pay that because I was awarded a full university scholarship, raised by a working mother with modest income. Today tuition for one year at Princeton costs $41,820. Princeton speaks of money and elite families. So I noted with great interest a new study published by two Princeton professors on wealth in America since 1981.

Martin Gilens is Professor of Politics at Princeton University together with Benjamin I. Page Professor at Northwestern University have published results of a unique analysis “using a unique data set that includes measures of the key variables for 1,779 policy issues.” The study concludes that, “Multivariate analysis indicates that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on US government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence. The results provide substantial support for theories of Economic-Elite Domination…”

Their study further concluded, “When the preferences of economic elites and the stands of organized interest groups are controlled for, the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy.”

Finally they conclude, “…Our analyses suggest that majorities of the American public actually have little influence over the policies our government adopts. Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance, such as regular elections, freedom of speech and association, and a widespread (if still contested) franchise. But we believe that if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America’s claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened.”

In a subsequent media interview, Gilens noted what they concluded in their analysis of volumes of data from 1981-2002 for government policy decisions and the role of elites versus ordinary citizens in some 1,800 different policy initiatives: “One central factor is the role of money in our political system, and the overwhelming role that affluent
individuals that affluent individuals and organized interests play, in campaign finance and in lobbying. And the second thing is the lack of mass organizations that represent and facilitate the voice of ordinary citizens. Part of that would be the decline of unions in the country which has been quite dramatic over the last 30 or 40 years. And part of it is the lack of a socialist or a worker's party.”

The study verifies with ample empirical data what I have witnessed during the course of my own life as an American over the past four decades. There has been a silent coup d’etat of the monied class, an American oligarchy. Names such as Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, David Rockefeller, Sheldon Adelson (main financier of Mitt Romney for President), the Koch Brothers (main financiers of the Tea Party political movement), George H.W. Bush and family. The top 1% have reshaped the fundamentals of American life, culture and above all politics. A decision to wage war today against Iraq, Afghanistan or Syria depends not on the will of average Americans. Obama was elected on a pledge to close the US Army torture center at Guantanamo and six years on has yet to do. He won a Nobel Peace Prize in his first month and proceeded to wage more war in Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya and most recently Syria and Ukraine.

It is important to have this in mind when judging “America.” The United States of America today bears little resemblance to that I knew when I grew up in the early 1960’s, when a used good Chevy cost $650 and college tuition could be afforded by ordinary Americans if they were willing to study. The oligarchy that has taken policy control behind a thin façade of “democracy” has ultimately ruined the industrial and social fabric of the United States. They are the ones behind the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, or bank deregulation so they can loot the planet. This new study by Princeton’s Prof. Gilens is a refreshing attempt, even if academic and from one of the most elite academic universities, to shed some light on what is fundamentally wrong with America over the past three decades.

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