

Equality and the Fourth of July

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The Fourth of July celebrates the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, signed by representatives of the 13 colonies to proclaim their separation from the King of Great Britain on this day, 238 years ago.

The Declaration of Independence marked a major turning point in history, not only for the people of what would become the United States of America, but for the entire world. In announcing their irrevocable break from the British monarchy, the founders sought to realize in practice the great progressive conceptions of the Enlightenment.

Equality was central to the principles proclaimed in the summer of 1776. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” the document sets out in its second paragraph, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Commenting on the radicalism of the American Revolution, historian Gordon Wood has noted, “Equality was in fact the most radical and most powerful ideological force let loose in the Revolution,” which had an appeal “far more potent than any of the revolutionaries realized” and “tore through American society and culture with awesome power.” The notion of equality became deeply embedded in the consciousness of the people, with reverberations that continue to the present day.

That the Revolution in the New World posed a danger to aristocratic privilege and arbitrary power everywhere was understood very clearly by those who led it and by those who opposed it. The War of Independence, Marx would later note, sounded the tocsin for the French Revolution and all the great democratic revolutions of that era.

The American Revolution was a bourgeois democratic revolution. Neither it nor those who led it could transcend the social conditions of the day. As

such, the historical event could not live up to the ideals that its greatest proponents laid out. Nevertheless, the American Revolution—and, in particular, the Declaration of Independence—resonated in every subsequent progressive episode in American history. Indeed, it was to “the proposition that all men are created equal” that Abraham Lincoln would refer four score and seven years later when he delivered his famous address on the battlefield at Gettysburg, in the midst of the Civil War to abolish the barbaric institution of slavery—the Second American Revolution.

The social, political and cultural state of present-day America makes a mockery of the principles that are recalled and celebrated on July 4.

Inequality is the defining feature of American life. The aristocratic principle has been reborn. If the current rulers could, they would reestablish titles and ranks of nobility, the official proclamations of privilege—and no doubt there are some who are already conspiring to do so.

The cancer of inequality infects every ruling national institution—the White House, led by a president who has become, solely on the basis of his political career, a multi-millionaire; the Congress, which is populated by scores of multi-millionaires; and the Supreme Court, in which eight of the nine justices are multi-millionaires. In short, all three branches of the federal government are controlled by individuals who are themselves part of the richest 1 percent of American society.

And then there is the media, in which those who dish out the propaganda that serves the interests of the state and the corporate-financial elite are paid millions of dollars annually for their faithful service.

The American aristocracy has grown rich largely through financial fraud. Six years ago, it sparked a global economic crisis through its manic speculation. Yesterday, the Dow Jones Industrial Average surpassed 17,000 for the first time in its 118-year history. The

financial traders celebrated the comments of Fed Chairman Janet Yellen, who proclaimed on Wednesday that the spigots funneling cash into the markets would remain open. The orgy of excess comes on top of social devastation and decline for the vast majority of the population. The words used by the great Tom Paine to describe the aristocracy on the eve of the French Revolution of 1789 (which was inspired by the American example) come to mind: “They pity the plumage and forget the dying bird.”

The aristocratic principle is present in every aspect of American policy. Globally, it finds expression in unrelenting militarism, a criminal foreign policy based on plunder and conquest. With increasingly reckless abandon, the American ruling class has launched a series of wars, leaving disaster and chaos in its wake. More than ten years after the invasion of Iraq laid waste to one of the most advanced societies in the Middle East, US troops, drones and military aircraft are once again heading back—even as the Obama administration stokes war with Russia over Ukraine and China over energy-rich regions in the South Pacific.

High levels of social inequality are incompatible with democracy. This is demonstrated in the unprecedented assault on the democratic principles that flowed from the Declaration of Independence and were embodied in the Bill of Rights, such as due process, freedom of speech and the press, the prohibition against unreasonable searches and seizures, the separation of church and state.

Whatever remains of democratic institutions are threatened by a colossal military-intelligence-police apparatus. Within the ruling establishment, the most basic democratic conceptions no longer exist. The president proclaims the right to assassinate American citizens without due process, and this does not produce any serious objection from within the state apparatus. Nearly 2 million Americans languish in prisons.

Today, the massive growth of social inequality is the focus of increasing public attention. There are vague, insubstantial and insincere calls for “something” to be done, while some among the wealthy speak nervously of “pitchforks” on the horizon. But these “somethings” amount to nothing. In all the official discussions of social inequality, there is virtually no mention of the fundamental cause of inequality: capitalism.

The fact is that nothing can be or will be done within

the framework of the existing political and economic system to reverse the ever-more extreme concentration of wealth in the United States.

The fight for social equality today requires the conscious struggle to put an end to capitalism and establish a socialist system based on public ownership, under the democratic control of the working class, of the banks and large corporations. In carrying out this task, it is the international working class that is the true inheritor of the egalitarian ideals and revolutionary traditions of the Fourth of July.



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