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Is There a Reawakening of American Democracy?

Interview with Eric Foner

Nicolas DELALANDE

While the presidential campaign is coming to an end, Eric Foner, one of the most prominent American historians, analyses the changes of American democracy and explains why this election could mark a shift in the history of American politics. Barack Obama's campaign could be an important step toward a society where race would no longer be a powerful dividing line.

Eric Foner is DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University. He is one of the most prominent historians of American democracy in the 19th century. His publications have concentrated on the intersections of intellectual, political and social history, and the history of American race relations.

His best-known books are:

- *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: the Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1970.
- *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1976.
- *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana University Press, 1983.
- *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, New York, Harper & Row, 1988.
- *The Story of American Freedom*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1998.
- *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and his World*, New York, W. W. Norton, 2008.

Americans and politics

La Vie des Idées: In his famous book *La démocratie en Amérique* published in the 1830s, Tocqueville expressed his admiration for the intensity and the quality of democratic life in America. He was amazed by the vitality of voluntary organizations and by the mass involvement of citizens in electoral politics. How different is today's American democracy, on the eve of the 2008 presidential election, from the one Tocqueville depicted in the 19th century?

Eric Foner: Of course, Tocqueville is describing a very different political system. First of all, today we have pretty close to universal suffrage for adults, there are some people who can't vote but, basically, there are no large restrictions on the right to vote. When Tocqueville was writing, there were two millions slaves in the country, women could not vote, in other words the political nation, the electorate, was adult white men. What was democratic about it was that property qualifications had been eliminated in almost all the states, so basically all adult white men could vote. But that was still only a portion of the whole population. So that was a much more narrower democratic system than we have today. On the other hand, people's participation in democracy was much more intense: politics performed a role in society that today is filled not only by politics but by entertainment, by movies, by the Internet, by sports events. It was a major form of popular entertainment, involvement. The political leaders were national, popular, celebrities: Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, these were larger than lay figures. There is no politicians today who have this mass following that those great political leaders did. As I said, they were like movie stars, popular singers.

The political party system was far different than today: the parties were much more tightly organised, people identified with the party. Today, the parties are really much less important. Obama and McCain rarely mention what party they are representing. McCain never says he is a Republican, when he mentions republicans it is to say that he has fought against them, that he wants to be bipartisan. Obama is a Democrat but look at the ads and posters, they don't mention the name of the political party at all. In the 19th century, the political party was the key thing : people were born into a political party, they identified with the political party, of course they could change their mind in elections, but the parties were central to American democracy in a way that they aren't today. Voter participation was far higher then that it is now: in 1840, in 1896, maybe 80 % of the eligible voters were coming out to vote, today if

you get about 50% you consider it as a very high turnout and in local elections today, 20% is considered OK. There was much more popular involvement with politics among those who were part of the political nation, which is a much smaller fraction of the whole population than it is today, so it is a somewhat mixed situation.

La Vie des Idées: There is a widespread judgement that Western countries have entered an era of democratic disenchantment since the 1980s. Many scholars have underlined the loss of legitimacy of elected officials and institutions and the way people tend to distrust their deputies. As an historian of American democracy, do you think it is a new phenomenon? How deep is this so-called “crisis of democracy”? Does this presidential campaign reflect a renewed interest in politics?

Eric Foner: Yes, there has been a distancing on the part of many people from democracy. I think what has happened since the 1980s is two things. One is the ideological demonization of the state: there always has been an antistatist tradition in America, different from France, but still, with Reagan, or actually not even Reagan, Carter, or you could go back further, since the Vietnam War, which convinced many people that the government lies, does not tell the truth to the people, and then Nixon with Watergate, where the government was breaking the law, and violating the Constitution and the President was evicted from office, then Carter who was elected on the grounds that he was not part of the government at all, that he was an outsider, then Reagan who really developed this comprehensive antistatist ideology, that has been the dominant ideology of American society since. We are still living in the age of Reagan, and Clinton, I think, was sort of a “minor league” Reagan. When Clinton said in one of his big speeches that “the age of big government is over”, he was telling people “I am adopting the basic approach of Reagan, even though I may differ on particular issues”. So, I think we have lived through a generation or two of demonization of the government, which obviously is going to affect the functioning of democracy.

Second of all, we have had government after government which just lies to the people, and if government has lost his legitimacy there is reason for it. People don't trust their leaders, whether it's Bush, Clinton, Reagan, Carter, they all lied. And people don't trust their elected leaders with all these scandals: sex scandals, money scandals, so it is understandable that there is a kind of lack of confidence in democracy. Also, I think the issues confronting American society that are important to people are issues that it does not seem like the

government has any actual impact on: globalization, today financial crisis, terrorism. It does not seem like government is able to really come up with any kind of real solution to these problems. Now, it may be that this presidential campaign does reflect a shift: people are looking more to action by government. We will see, that does seem to be a greater engagement, we will see what the voter turnout is, everyone is expecting a higher number of people voting this time. Obama has certainly tried to mobilize large numbers of younger voters and others who don't vote, generally speaking. It would be nice to have a President to people could feel respect for, we haven't have had that for a long time.

La Vie des Idées: When observing the US presidential campaign, a European citizen cannot but be puzzled by the role of money in electoral politics. This time, money seems to favour the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, who is raising much more funds than his Republican rival, which allows him to compete with stronger means in swing states. Does history provide an explanation for this relatively high tolerance for money as a legitimate tool in American politics?

Eric Foner: In a large country like this, money has always been very important. Some people think the great turning point was the election of 1896 where William McKinley and his campaign manager Mark Hanna raised enormous sums of money from business men in order to fight William Jennings Bryan who was the candidate of the populists, of the farmers, and that was the first really big money election. In the 19th century, the political parties used to finance campaigns, and political office holders financed the political party. In the 20th century, with the reform of campaign finance and with the decline of the political party, they have had to come to rely more and more on business to fund the campaign. And today with television advertising and the cost and extreme length of the campaign and the primaries, the cost has run into tens of billions of dollars and everybody says "it's ridiculous", but nobody does anything about it. Look at England, the government dissolves Parliament and thirty days later there is an election. In the US, the campaign is going on for two years or more, that is absurd, we should try to go to an English system where there is a much shorter campaign period and then maybe it would cost less. But the problem is this either means the candidate must become beholdant to business or look for extremely rich people who could run and finance their own campaign like the mayor of New York, Bloomberg, or Romney, well-to-do people who don't have to raise money because they have so much by themselves. But of course this

is a serious problem for democracy that nothing can happen without large amounts of money behind it.

Politics, race and gender

La Vie des Idées: Barack Obama's campaign and his possible election as President of the USA seem to mark a turning point in the history of race relations in America. What has been the role of race in the shaping of American democracy since the 19th century? And does the memory of slavery, for instance, still play a role in contemporary politics?

Eric Foner: I think anybody who knows something about American history will see the election of Obama – if he is elected – as a major turning point in American race relations. I don't care if you like Obama or you prefer McCain, it is astonishing in the long trajectory of American history that a black man may be elected President of the United States. In the entire history of the USA, there have been four black governors of states, four! In all of American history, there have been only five black members of the US Senate, so the barriers to Blacks getting offices where you need a lot of white votes have been enormous. There were black members of Congress but that is because they were representing black districts. When you get to the Senate, to governor, to President, basically it is white votes that are going to determinate. So race is a high barrier.

I think Obama has succeeded partly because he does project what they call a “postracial image”. He is not running as a black candidate, he never mentions the fact that he is a black candidate, and he does not emphasize traditional black issues. He is not running as what they call a “race man”, but there have been other black candidates like that in the past who wanted to go beyond race but certainly, I think, race has always shaped American democracy. Certainly since the civil rights movement, race has been one of the major strong points of the Republican party. Richard Nixon originated what they called the “Southern strategy” for the Republicans to play upon white resentment over the civil rights movement. The South used to be solidly Democratic, after civil rights it shifted over to be solidly republican, although Obama is now making inroads. And so, race has always been a key dividing line in American politics and I think Obama's campaign, whatever the result is, is an important step toward maybe a society where race is not quite as divisive as it has been in our history.

La Vie des Idées: During the Democratic primary, it was sometimes assumed that Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton embodied two groups, Blacks and women, that were formerly excluded from democratic participation and whose interests were at odds rather than converging. What has been the relationship between movements promoting black men's political rights and those in favour of women's right to vote in the history of American democracy?

Eric Foner: You could write a long book about this. Here is a complicated story because the movement for women's rights arose out of the abolitionist movement. The movement to abolish slavery, as one person said before the Civil War, was "the school of rights for all Americans". The early women's movement learnt the language of rights and the organisational tactics from the abolitionists and they worked together. After the Civil War, there was a split, when black men were given the right to vote but white women still didn't have it, some of the women's movement moved off into their own direction because they thought they had been betrayed by the abolitionists. Later on, in order to get the right to vote for women, they acquiesced in the disenfranchisement of Blacks. Blacks had the right to vote taken away around the turn of the century. When women got the right to vote in 1920, it was only because they had basically agreed that it would not affect black women in the south, and that Blacks would still be disenfranchised in the south. So, there have been tensions between these movements over the years.

On the other hand, since the New Deal, the Democratic Party has been the home of both women activists and black voters and probably they have cooperated more often than they have been at odds. There have been certain tensions, I think many black political leaders are not sympathetic to the women's movement in a way, they have a machismo kind of attitude toward things. Many Blacks are very conservative on issues like gay rights, women's rights. If the Republicans were not so obviously racists in many ways, on social issues they might win more black votes. But I think this split was grossly exaggerated during the primaries. Hillary certainly represented women and Obama got the black vote, but there is no necessary conflict at all between these two movements and in fact there is a lot of overlap. Under an Obama presidency, there would be great gains made for women, especially compared to what has happened under Bush.

Americans, the state and economic democracy

La Vie des Idées: It is often said that Americans are, by nature, distrustful of the state. Is this idea a political myth or a genuine peculiarity of American democracy? To what extent do the recent calls for more regulation in the financial market and for state intervention challenge the predominance of free market ideologies in American politics?

Eric Foner: Many Americans are distrustful of the state, but I think to say this is a general rule of all of American history is not very correct. There certainly have been strong movements and periods where the state was brought in: the Progressive Era, the New Deal, the Great Society. Black people have always looked to the national state to protect them against local violence and local discrimination. Whether it was Lincoln emancipating the slaves or the civil rights movement of the 1960s, they looked to a powerful national state to protect people's rights. I think when people find there is a crisis they turn to the state. One of the many mistakes, crimes and errors of the Bush administration was after 9/11: people wanted to cooperate, to look to the state and to the community as a point of unity, and the Bush administration was incapable of doing anything with that because of its free market ideology. People wanted to have a sense of collective action and collective identity, and all Bush was saying was: "Well, go shopping that will help the society". Today, of course, in a financial crisis, people are again looking to the state. All these rich guys who never wanted to be regulated are certainly going hat in hand and begging for taxpayers' money. So one hopes that we will see a movement away from the extreme deregulation which has gotten us into this mess and toward a more balanced kind of situation which might not be all that different from France, Britain or many European countries, actually.

La Vie des Idées: Economic issues seem to hold sway over the presidential campaign's debates. The question of "economic security", that had been overlooked in American politics for a very long time, seems to be revived by the financial crisis. What have been the significance and the role of economic democracy in the general history of American democracy?

Eric Foner: I think Americans have a very complex set of definitions of economic democracy and economic freedom. On the one hand, there is this strong "laissez-faire" tradition of free market and free competition. On the other hand, there is another long

tradition of economic security, that there should not be a level beneath which people should sink. Even today, people think the government should guarantee jobs, for those who don't have them, should help people keep their homes. Even though the government seems like that, we are not a society of just pure "doggy dog", tense competition, "every man for himself". Public views generally do think that the government has an economic responsibility to help people pursue their economic interests and not fall below a certain level. But the relation between economic and political democracy is a very complex and difficult one in American history, which has never been solved. People want individual initiative, individual freedom, but they also want economic security and these cut against each other in some ways. But yes, I think, again, today people are looking to the government to help them when they are in danger of losing their homes, their bank accounts, their retirement accounts. They are turning to the government to help them. The government does appear to be the guarantor of last resort of people's economic security. Now, how this will work out, I don't know. If McCain is elected, nothing will happen. If Obama is elected, we may see a significant shift toward a more active government role than we have seen in the last generation.

La Vie des Idées: Political discourses reflect how societies view and represent themselves. It is striking that both candidates to the presidential election speak on behalf of the middle class, or, as they say, of "Main Street" as opposed to "Wall Street". However, they seem to pay little attention to the representation of working and poor people or to issues of labour relations and economic inequalities. How can we explain this apparent lack of interest for the questions of poverty, redistribution and equality in the political debate?

Eric Foner: That is a very good question and it is quite accurate about this campaign. There is an assumption that the mass of the electorate is middle class, that if you appeal to the middle class, that is how to win the election. Also, most Americans define themselves as middle class: very rich people talk of themselves as middle class, poor people talk of themselves as middle class. If you ask Americans, 80% of them are middle class. On the other hand, if you look at the class structure, 80% are not middle class. There is a much larger number of the poor, of working class people and of course rich. There is a very large middle class in this country, but it is not as large as what people think it is. But the general political wisdom is: this is how you have to talk, and that if you talk about the poor, about labour – it is very striking that Obama, the Democratic candidate, never mentions the word "labour union" –, then you are accused of fomenting class conflict and middle class people, suburban people,

the swing voters, get frightened by that. Whereas if you talk about mainstream middle class, you can appeal to this broad section of the electorate.

I don't know if this is really true, but this seems to be the wisdom accepted by both parties. It is generally assumed that poor people don't vote, and cannot be gotten to vote. Some people say "well, look, only half of the electors vote, a lot of people don't vote, the poor, why don't we say something to get them out to vote?" But they are not willing to risk that, they are not willing to risk frightening the middle class by appealing in a strong direct way to working class voters. But still, a lot of what they are really talking about are on working class people: people who cannot afford health insurance, people whose jobs are in danger, people who are finding manufacturing moving abroad, so they are talking about issues of class without really using the language of class.

Freedom and liberalism

La Vie des Idées: Both candidates proclaim their attachment to the defense of American freedom. However, as you have shown in *The Story of American Freedom* in 1998, this concept has always had various meanings and has been the subject of intense debates and conflicts since the American Revolution. To which traditions of American freedom do Obama and McCain's ideologies belong?

Eric Foner: That is interesting. I think McCain is very much in the modern Republican Reagan tradition of freedom, which is very much limited government, "laissez-faire", free competition, anti-communism (although that is not really an issue at the moment), strong military and really distrust of government. I think McCain is a very accurate reflector of limited regulation on all fronts, environmental, etc., with that overlay of this social conservatism which then, even though they are against big government, they want the government to regulate your private moral behaviour: homosexuality, abortion right, things like that. This is very much the Reagan tradition, which has become the dominant view in many ways in American politics.

Obama is a complicated combination of traditional democratic notions of freedom, which tend to have a greater emphasis on equality, on government action, on security, but still with an overlay of this Reagan approach of limited government, of emphasising private and voluntary

initiative. But Obama also, despite the fact that he doesn't talk about race, does come out of a black tradition. It is the tradition of the great black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the tradition of trying to think of economic policies that will help move the country beyond race, that the notion of freedom is a society where race no longer matters, not because people are swiping it under the rug and ignoring it, but because you actually have greater opportunity and equality. That is a tradition of black politics. Even though Obama does not claim that tradition – he does not say “I'm in the black political tradition” –, I think he is in a way. It is the tradition of Martin Luther King: the notion of going beyond race, in some way, in a more equal society, as the essence of American freedom. I think Obama does fit into that category.

La Vie des Idées: Liberalism has been continuously weak in US politics since the 1970s. Isn't it a paradoxical effect of George Bush's presidency that its excessively conservative-oriented decisions now seem to favour a reawakening of liberalism?

Eric Foner: The great historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. wrote this book some years ago, *The cycles of American history*, in which he just said there is a sort of pendulum swing: conservatism/liberalism, or state/non state. He kept waiting for the reawakening of liberalism to happen, but he died last year and it hadn't happened. It may be happening but it is coming under a new name. Obama does not talk about liberalism, he does not say “I'm a liberal”. As far as I can see, there is only one leading politician who says “I'm a liberal” and that is the mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg. When he ran last time, he said “I'm a liberal”, “I'm proud to be a liberal”: he's so rich he can say anything he wants, and New York is a liberal city. So, it is liberalism without the name of it. They call it progressive now, or they don't even give it a name. But you're right, it includes many aspects of traditional liberalism. But the liberalism that came out of the 1960s, not the 1930s: it is the liberalism of some interest in economic equality, but mostly personal freedom, and that is why he is against laws binding abortion, he is in the favour of the rights of gays and of Blacks achieving equality. It is the liberalism which says “let's get rid of these artificial barriers”, but not the liberalism of economic radicalism, or economic redistribution, labour, the New Deal liberalism. That is really gone from both parties at the moment, as a coherent ideology. But we are in the 21st century, Obama's liberalism, whatever it is called, is for the modern world. Because after all, labour unions are now a minor feature of American life, whereas they used to be a powerful feature. So, unless the labour movement revives, you're not going to see that “labour-infused” liberalism be a dominant force in the politics again.

Interview by Nicolas Delalande – Transcription by Feyrouz Djabali.

Further reading :

- Eric Foner's webpage : <http://www.ericfoner.com/>

- A review by Eric Foner of Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy : Jefferson to Lincoln*, published in *The Nation* : <http://www.ericfoner.com/reviews/103105nation.html>

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