

by Christopher D. Cook

Robert Reich

Robert Reich entered the national stage, moderately left, when President Bill Clinton appointed him Labor Secretary in 1992. But after some bruising battles with Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, who wanted to ban the phrase “corporate welfare” in the White House, Reich left the Administration at the end of the first term—an experience he describes in his book *Locked in the Cabinet*. He has written more than a dozen books, most of them about the U.S. economy or the future of liberalism in America. His latest, *Beyond Outrage*, accompanied by his own whimsical political cartoons and dedicated to “the Occupiers,” is a clarion call for progressive change.

Reich has become increasingly vocal about America’s widening income and

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wealth divides. He appears regularly on national TV shows as a commentator. One of his video blogs, “The Truth About the Economy,” discussing how the super-rich in America have grabbed more wealth and income and political power, went viral, with more than 1,500,000 viewers.

Reich is one of the founding editors of *The American Prospect*, and he’s currently the head of Common Cause.

But his day job remains teaching. Reich is a professor of public policy at the University of California-Berkeley, which is where I met with him recently. Dressed in beige khakis and a faded purple sweater, he greeted me with amiable nonchalance in the lobby of the Goldman School of Public Policy. He squeezed me in for an hour just before delivering the convocation to incoming students.

Q • **Looking over your time in politics, what have you learned?**

Robert Reich: One of the most important things is the central theme of my latest book, *Beyond Outrage*: Nothing good happens in Washington, or for that matter, in state capitals, unless good people outside Washington or those state capitals make it happen. Unless they push very hard. Unless they’re organized, mobilized, and energized to force the political system to respond. The rest of us have to do more than simply vote, pay our taxes, and respond to summonses to be on juries. Citizenship goes far beyond those three. We’ve got to insist on being heard.

Q: It’s scary to think that Republicans could win by labeling President Obama as a liberal.

Reich: The whole football field has moved so far to the right in my lifetime. I mean, Barack Obama would have been seen as a liberal Republican—a kind of Rockefeller Republican—in the 1960s. He is at most a centrist. To think of him as somebody on the left is often almost laughable.

Q: He’s not a socialist?

Reich: He wouldn’t even come up with a public option, let alone Medicare for all. He attached no strings whatsoever to the bailout of Wall Street. He didn’t want to resurrect the Glass-Steagall Act or limit the size of the banks. Every stop along the way, he has opted for the safe and so-called middle ground.

But if anybody is to blame, it’s us. It’s citizens. It’s progressives who have not put enough pressure on Washington, who have allowed the Republicans to take over the House, who have not pushed Senate Democrats nearly far enough to the left, and have

allowed the Democrats to become a kind of wishy-washy centrist party. It amazes me how ineffective the Democratic Party has been in selling a message. The Republicans, say what you want, they are reverse-Robin Hood, Social Darwinist regressives, but at least they have a clear message.

Q: Do you think some of that has to do with the progressives’ relationship to the Democratic Party?

Reich: The right says, “We’re going to pull the establishment kicking and screaming in our direction,” and that’s what the tea partiers are doing. Step by step, they are remaking the Republican Party in their image. The progressive left tends not to want to do that. Instead, we either run fringe candidates like Ralph Nader who endanger the Democrat who is running, or we complain and stage angry demonstrations. We tend not to get serious about organizing ourselves for the long haul, in terms of the nitty-gritty of electoral politics. Organized labor at certain times in its history has been more strategic about the Democratic Party than at other times, but let’s face it: Today, at least among private sector unions, you have such a small number of people unionized that it’s barely a political force.

The radical right has at least some semblance of organization. The tea partiers, even though sponsored and financed by some very wealthy interests, nonetheless do have a strategy, and it is at least something of a grassroots movement. On the left, I expected and hoped—and still hope—that the Occupy movement will play a role, but the left has a kind of innate genetic predisposition not to be terribly well organized. If you think about it, people who like hierarchy and discipline and want to be told what to do tend to migrate to the right. Movements on the left, particularly in the United States, have always had a hard time getting going because there is that anti-establishment, anti-organizational premise. We are not seeing the kind of progressive organization that we need to have.

Q: But progressives have certainly put a lot of energy into elections and protest movements. What else can people do?

Reich: The errors we make are the same errors we’ve made repeatedly over the years. Number one, we don’t do it all together. We get enamored with certain pet issues. Some of us are most concerned about the environment. Some of us are dramatically committed to gay rights. Some of us are deeply upset by our military and expansionism, and our disregard for civil

liberties. We're in our issue bubbles.

Secondly, we think of Washington as the only place where anything happens. So our form of activism is either to go to Washington or to make a contribution to a Washington-based group. We seem to have forgotten the art and practice of grassroots organizing.

Thirdly, we're impatient. If something doesn't happen within two years, we say, the hell with it. We forget that the civil rights movement took at least sixty years. The labor movement, seventy years. Women's suffrage, fifty years. We don't have that patient time horizon.

And fourth, we don't understand that the real fight begins the day after Election Day.

Q: Some studies show that up to half of America is either poor or near poor, but poverty is not being discussed in the elections at all.

Reich: Poverty is not being discussed. Child poverty is not being talked about. And there are a lot of other important issues we're not talking about. We're not really talking about Afghanistan. We're not talking about American policies toward the developing world. We're not talking about climate change, even though we've just suffered through the most broiling summer we have had in many years, and we're facing rising food prices, because of climate change. This election is being fought out on a narrower and narrower and narrower field.

Q: Does this election seem even more devoid of ideas than previous elections to you?

Reich: No, when Bill Clinton ran for reelection, that was perhaps the most brainless election I've ever been associated with. Dick Morris, who was Clinton's political adviser, told the President to talk about nothing except V-chips in television sets and school uniforms. Those were the two big issues. I mean, it was absurd. Bill Clinton ended up winning reelection, but with no mandate to do anything in his second term.

Q: If you were Labor Secretary now, what would be your top priorities for American workers?

Reich: Number one, I would focus on part-time and contingent workers, people who are not full-time employees formally. They have no protections at all, and their numbers are growing. They don't get time-and-a-half for overtime. They don't have work safety protections. They don't even have minimum wage protections. That would be a priority. Secondly, work



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hard to make it easier for individuals to unionize in the private sector. The Employee Free Choice Act—it should not be an issue. It's obvious that workers are being intimidated and bullied. I've seen it with my eyes over and over again. We've got to have stronger unions, particularly in the sectors of the economy that are sheltered from international competition, where you don't have to worry about low-wage workers abroad. I'm talking about the vast personal service sector: retail, restaurant, hotel, hospital, all of those workers that get paid very little. They have very, very little job security. They need a union. I would provide much better pension protection. You've got people who were wiped out in 2008—their entire savings. We still have a Wall Street that is completely irresponsible, and that irresponsibility is falling on a lot of unprotected people who are trusting that their pensions are safe when they are not safe. So there is a lot to do.

Q: You write a lot about the need to prime the pump, and you call for policies to enable people to consume more to keep the economy going. How do you square that with the crisis of climate change and the need to consume less and produce less?

Reich: It's not a matter of consuming less. It's a matter of consuming differently. Maintaining adequate aggregate demand does not mean filling up our homes with stuff. It could just as easily mean having a broader and more affordable health care system, having better access to schools and universities and early childhood education, and spending more on controlling carbon emissions. All of these entail spending, and the reason why rich nations tend to have better environments than poor nations is because they can afford it. Well, we are the richest of rich nations. We can afford to do all of these things. Consumption is not the same thing as consumerism.

Q: Given the state of the planet ecologically and its finite resources and escalating climate change, what do we need to do about capitalism?

Reich: Historically, progressives have time and again saved capitalism from itself, from its own excesses. That's been the role of progressives, at least in America. In the Progressive Era, during the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, capitalism was going down the chute. People were giving up on it, but progressives said no, we regulate it. We tame it. We make it work for people. I don't see how American capitalism or even global capitalism can become buoyant again, particularly in light of what happened with the

meltdown of Wall Street, which is still reverberating around the globe and still burdening this economy, without strong progressive reform.

So it's not a matter of capitalism versus socialism or capitalism versus communism. There are no other isms in the world. There really never were. Russia was not a communist state. It was a totalitarian state. European socialism was really European democratic socialism, which was a strong social safety net, and very worker friendly environments, but it was not really socialism.

Q: You talk about “supercapitalism” and democratic capitalism, but a lot of people who study capitalism say that inevitably capitalism produces the things that are supercapitalism—the concentration of wealth, tendencies toward monopoly. Even Adam Smith warned of these things. Isn't it still just capitalism, whether you call it super or democratic?

Reich: Capitalism does have a tendency toward excess, whether that excess is concentrated income or wealth or negative externalities (to use the fancy economist's term) of costs imposed on the public in general. And there's the corruption that goes with too much money in a few hands. But that's exactly why progressives are a necessary correlate of capitalism. Progressivism has time and again added the corrective that has enabled capitalism to survive. One way to look at it is that a progressive capitalism is a necessity. Capitalism can't survive without its progressive component. You need another wave of progressive reform to correct the current excesses. It would be nice if we didn't have to go through that. It's a little dizzying historically, but nobody's come up with a better system.

Communism doesn't work. Socialism hasn't really been tried. Progressive capitalism, if you want to call it that, is the only thing that works.

Q: Don't we still have a trap globally? People want to drive cars, have computers, cell phones, all these different objects that come out of the earth.

Reich: There is absolutely no reason we cannot organize our economy to maximize productivity and also maximize the efficient stewardship of our planet. In fact, I think the only way we are going to host a planet with fifteen billion people is through extraordinary increases in productivity and technological prowess that enable us to feed and house and transport these people without destroying the planet. To the extent that we can design rules that create the proper incentives for capitalists to do all this, wonderful. ♦