Q&A with Ronald Formisano,  
author of PLUTOCRACY IN AMERICA

Why did you decide to write this book?  
My scholarly interests and publications have ranged from the politics of the early Republic to the school desegregation controversy in Boston in the 1970s. I am a political junkie and throughout my life have published opeds on contemporary topics in the local newspaper, from Worcester, Massachusetts, to Gainesville, Florida, to currently Lexington Kentucky. The increasing, extreme inequality in this country began to alarm me after 2008 and I wanted to something about it.

The topic has attracted much attention, including some good books. How does yours differ?  
Some excellent books indeed have addressed inequality and I have learned from them. I believe mine casts a wider net, describing both the open and hidden infrastructure of inequality. It also addresses more the question of how the very character of America is changing for the worst.

Can you be specific about that change?  
The United States is no longer the land of opportunity. The perception persists, but the fact that Horatio Alger is dead is gaining ground. We now have less social mobility than most economically advanced nations. The panacea has always been “more education,” but our system from the bottom and especially to the top is failing, except for doing great at educating children of the wealthy.

What else is changing?  
The U.S is becoming increasingly segregated by income and wealth. This process bears most heavily on the poor and low income families who are concentrating in pockets of disadvantage.

And the middle class, once the pride of the nation, and the foundation of its democratic civil culture, is shrinking, and many of those still in the middle are struggling to stay in it.

What are the main causes of inequality?  
It’s complicated but the first thing to stress is federal government policy over the past three and a half decades, favoring the wealthy and corporations; unfair tax systems; outrageously high CEO pay multiple times the average worker and far outdistancing the difference in peer countries.

Wages have stagnated or shrunk while production has gone up. Corporate America has squeezed money and benefits out of workers pockets and sent it to the executive suites where CEOs, as economist Thomas Piketty said, set their own compensation. Wouldn’t everyone like that?
Have anti-poverty programs helped?
Yes they have, especially from the 1960s to the 1970s. But the safety net has not kept pace with the depression of wages. The US spends less on redistribution than other advanced countries. Wrong ideas about poverty abound, and hatred of the poor among reactionaries and Fox News spreads more misconceptions. Forty percent of Americans at one time are poor or near-poor. Many take advantage of welfare programs just temporarily.

What needs to be done?
I am pessimistic despite inequality having entered the 2016 campaign because of a dysfunctional Congress and the Republican Party still committed to plutocracy if not aristocracy, and Democrats afraid of the shibboleth of ‘class warfare.” There sure has been a class warfare waged against unions, workers, and low-income people for decades.

Is the U.S. a plutocracy and not a democracy?
Few things in political life and governance are absolute but the U.S. has gone over a tipping point to become more of a plutocracy serving the interests of multinational corporations and its wealthiest citizens. The Founders of this country rejected a society that would become like Europe with extreme inequality. Yes they accepted slavery, and wrote a constitution excluding groups we would not exclude today. But unquestionably they wanted the nation to remain a land of opportunity.

Again, what can be done?
Firstly, we need to keep calling attention, as “Plutocracy in America” does to how unfair our society has become. There cannot be enough books, enough blogs, enough speeches, enough reports showing the misery of millions of our fellow citizens; they need to keep coming. Ideally, I would like to see a government committed to full employment; a fair, progressive tax system not rigged for Wall Street, and state tax systems not relying on sales taxes; corporations to pay their fair share as they did in the 1950s and cease their war on workers. For God’s sake raise the damn minimum wage. And keep fighting to reverse Citizens United and McCutcheon.

How about the state level?
States need to regulate all the multifarious predators on low-income people and veterans: payday loan shops; cash advance tax preparers; auto title loans; nonprofit universities selling opportunity and delivering debt to millions; and they keep popping up like Medusa’s head. The predation on the poor is estimated to be a 25-30 billion dollar industry.

What do you hope people will take away from reading PLUTOCRACY IN AMERICA?
I hope readers will have a greater awareness of the immensity of the "social ills" caused by inequality, a determination to keep calling attention to it, and to support efforts to do something about it.