

# **Reform – when is it worthwhile?**

Brian Martin

2012

# Contents

ABSTRACT . . . . .	3
EDUCATION . . . . .	4
Opposing student cheating . . . . .	5
Progressive content . . . . .	6
Self-managed learning . . . . .	6
Facets of reform . . . . .	7
DEFENCE . . . . .	7
Military spending . . . . .	8
Opposition to nuclear weapons . . . . .	9
Conscription . . . . .	10
Facets of reform . . . . .	10
ELECTORAL POLITICS . . . . .	10
Pressure group politics . . . . .	11
Running for office . . . . .	12
Voting . . . . .	12
Facets of reform . . . . .	13
CONCLUSION . . . . .	13

## ABSTRACT

Reform and revolution are often presented as mutually exclusive. To probe how reform can contribute to radical change, nine case studies are examined: action on student cheating, progressive course content and self-managed learning, each in the area of education; campaigning against military spending, nuclear weapons and conscription, each in the area of defence; and pressure group politics, running for office and voting, each in the area of electoral politics. The case studies show that the way reform efforts are targeted and organised greatly affects their contribution towards self-managing alternatives. Four key dimensions of reform efforts are questioning of the system, experiences of participation, the way the system responds to protest, and whether change opens opportunities for further action.

---

Revolutionaries sometimes write off efforts at reforming the system as pointless or worse than nothing, propping up what needs to be overthrown. On the other hand, some of those working to improve society see revolutionaries, who want to tear down the system and build a new one, as dangerous wreckers. Are reform and revolution compatible?<sup>1</sup> André Gorz, writing in the 1960s, distinguished between two types of reform.<sup>2</sup> The first, 'reformist reform', is a reform that reinforces the system. The second, 'non-reformist reform', is a reform that lays the basis for further change. A strike for higher wages might simply buy off discontent and solidify capitalist control: it is a reform that strengthens the system. In contrast, pushing for greater worker control over shop-floor decisions can lay the basis for further worker initiatives: it is an example of non-reformist reform.

Gorz's idea is used implicitly by many progressives who select and develop campaigns according to their potential for empowering participants and laying the basis for further campaigning and mobilisation. But campaigners seldom sit down to articulate their long-term goals and then choose issues, campaigns and actions that best help to move towards these goals. For example, campaigners on issues such as nuclear power or climate change often focus on short-term objectives rather than long-term social change.<sup>3</sup> The result is an ongoing tension between current action and radical alternatives.

My aim here is to develop a set of categories and issues that can be used for assessing reform efforts in relation to more fundamental change. To do this, I look at a series of case studies in three areas where campaigners have been and continue to be active: education, defence and electoral politics. For each one I describe a self-managed alternative and then assess three reform efforts in

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the word 'reform' in the traditional sense of a change beneficial to humans and the environment. Politicians often call any policy change 'reform', including many regressive measures.

<sup>2</sup> André Gorz, *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 6–8. See also André Gorz, 'Reform and revolution', in *Socialism and Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), pp. 133–177. These originally appeared in French in 1964 and 1967 respectively.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Bill Moyer, with JoAnn McAllister, Mary Lou Finley, and Steven Soifer, *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2001), in describing a set of stages for social movement campaigns, point to a common phenomenon of demoralisation just on the verge of success, suggesting that many campaigners' primary attention is on immediate success rather than long-term empowerment.

relation to this alternative.<sup>4</sup> In the conclusion, I bring together the threads from the case studies to reflect on the potential for reform and on the relationship between reform and revolution.

In each of the three areas – education, defence and electoral politics – I pick three case studies that span a range from working within the system to challenging its fundamentals, in other words from reformist to non-reformist, on the surface at least. For example, in education, opposing student cheating is an attempt to make the system work better in its own terms, progressive content is an attempt to operate within the system but achieve broader purposes, and self-managed learning is a challenge to the standard teacher-student relationship. By using case studies located at different positions on the reform spectrum from reformist to non-reformist, it is easier to see commonalities across the spectrum.

None of these case studies is definitive. After all, even those who promote radical change disagree about their visions for society. My intention is not to argue whether particular actions are or are not contributing to long-term change, but rather to use the process of examination to highlight some of the key issues, in particular the relationship between methods and goals.

Anarchists have taken initiatives in relation to many of the case studies, for example on self-managed learning, opposition to nuclear weapons, and voting. Occasionally I mention connections to anarchist campaigning and theory, but not systematically. That is because my purpose is not an examination of anarchist theory and practice in relation to education, defence and electoral politics – though that would be a significant and worthy endeavour – but to examine areas of reform in relation to self-managed alternatives.

In the next three sections dealing with the case studies, I do not attempt to draw conclusions, but rather outline factors that relate to social change. In the conclusion, I pull out from the case studies several key features that can be used as criteria for examining the potential of reforms to move towards self-managing alternatives.

The process of examining case studies is not designed to judge whether actual campaigns help move towards alternatives. Instead, the process is intended to generate ideas about the dimensions of campaigns that are relevant for judgements about their potential for contributing towards self-managing alternatives. In other words, my goal is to suggest areas worth thinking about; campaigners are the ones who will decide how to proceed in practice.

## EDUCATION

Formal education systems in most of the world today are creatures of the state. The state mandates attendance at school, usually runs much or all of the school system, and regulates independent providers. Most schools themselves operate on the principle of command and authority: the

---

<sup>4</sup> Self-management refers to people collectively making decisions about how they will live, without domination or hierarchy. Self-management is a way of referring to both the organising principle and the practice of anarchist alternatives. See for example C. George Benello and Dimitrios Roussopoulos (eds), *The Case for Participatory Democracy: Some Prospects For a Radical Society* (New York: Grossman, 1971); Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970); Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973). In the workplace context, workers' self-management is similar in meaning to workers' control: Gerry Hunnius, G. David Garson and John Case (eds), *Workers' Control: A Reader on Labor and Social Change* (New York: Vintage, 1973); Ernie Roberts, *Workers' Control* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973); H. B. Wilson, *Democracy and the Work Place* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1974).

principal and board determine policy (or implement state policy); teachers run classes; pupils do what is required, or try to resist.

In self-managed alternatives along the model of free schools, pupils and teachers collectively run the education process, deciding on methods and content of learning. Anarchists have long promoted and supported free schools, seeing them as exemplars of educational alternatives.<sup>5</sup>

Another radical alternative is deschooling, popularised by Ivan Illich.<sup>6</sup> Deschooling means getting rid of the domination of education by professional teachers in institutionalised schooling systems. Instead, children would learn through their involvement in community activities, for example through helping out in workplaces or participating in organisations, as well as voluntary learning activities arranged by themselves or others. The deschooling alternative is not well-defined, but is certainly compatible with self-management.

Looking today for educational alternatives in action – examples of what Colin Ward calls anarchy in action<sup>7</sup> – there are numerous examples. Some instances of home schooling, in which parents enable their children to learn independently of formal schooling, fit the self-managed model. So do numerous free schools, often small and known to relatively few.<sup>8</sup> Within a few schools and colleges, teachers are enabled and encouraged to give maximum autonomy to students, for example through learning contracts that are alternatives to conventional curricula.

The alternative exists, but only in a few pockets surviving next to or occasionally within conventional educational systems. With this background, I canvass three examples with the aim of showing a variety of implications for reform and revolution.

## Opposing student cheating

Evidence suggests that many students cheat on assignments and in examinations at least some of the time.<sup>9</sup> Measures to reduce cheating have been on the education agenda since schooling became institutionalised. Policies and practices to reduce cheating rationalise educational competition, thus seeming to help sustain the role of schools as sorting devices that reproduce social inequality: they would seem to be a classic example of non-reformist reform.

Looking a bit more closely, though, opposing student cheating can be pursued in several different ways. The most long-standing and still most common approach is through stronger systems for teachers to monitor students and for penalties to be applied to cheaters. This approach relies on and reinforces the authority structure.

---

<sup>5</sup> Joel Spring, *A Primer of Libertarian Education* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1975). See also Bill Draves, *The Free University: A Model for Lifelong Learning* (Chicago, IL: Association Press, 1980); Allen Graubard, *Free the Children: Radical Reform and the Free School Movement* (New York: Random House, 1972); Jonathan Kozol, *Free Schools* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1971). See also Alan Gartner, Colin Greer and Frank Riessman (eds), *After Deschooling, What?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); John Holt, *Teach Your Own* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1981); Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning within Grassroots Cultures* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Ward, *Anarchy in Action*.

<sup>8</sup> The most famous example is Summerhill: A. S. Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (New York: Hart, 1960). Free schools, as referred to here, refer to schools with practices of self-management, and should be distinguished from schools within government systems labelled 'free.'

<sup>9</sup> Donald McCabe and Linda Klebe Trevino, 'What we know about cheating in college: longitudinal trends and recent developments', *Change*, 28(1) (1996), pp. 28–33.

A different and often effective approach is to involve students in developing and running systems for student honesty. Some universities and high schools have honour codes that are participatory: older students help instruct new students in the code, and the disciplinary panels have student representatives or even are run by students.<sup>10</sup> With what might be called participatory honour codes, students collectively have a stake in their own honesty.

The conclusion: student cheating can be approached in different ways. Some ways reinforce hierarchy; others give an experience in self-management.<sup>11</sup>

## **Progressive content**

Education systems are often seen as tools for enforcing a conventional picture of society and the world.<sup>12</sup> But within the system, many teachers introduce ideas critical of the status quo, for example concerning economic inequality, media bias and racial discrimination.<sup>13</sup> This is easiest in subjects like social studies, which deal with current issues, but is even possible in subjects like mathematics, through careful selection of examples.

Progressive content, when introduced by teachers on an individual basis, involves operating within the existing system to enable students to see other ways of understanding the world besides the dominant one. However, when progressive content is presented using conventional teacher-centred pedagogy, this apparently does little to challenge educational structures.

Progressive content can be turned into a reform in the usual sense by embedding this content into standard syllabuses and standardised examinations. This often occurs bit by bit, through the gradual efforts of curriculum designers and sympathetic teachers. Occasionally public debates erupt over the content of teaching, for example concerning the teaching of evolution in the US or the history of Japanese imperialism and militarism in Japan.

Introducing progressive content does not necessarily change the way classes are taught: it can mean replacing a teacher-imposed conservative content with a teacher-imposed progressive content. A key part of what students learn through their experience of authority relations in the classroom may remain unchanged.

## **Self-managed learning**

A deeper challenge to conventional education systems is to enable students to take a greater degree of control over their learning. This is fairly widely endorsed, at least in a rhetorical sense:

---

<sup>10</sup> Donald McCabe and Linda Klebe Trevino, 'Honesty and honor codes', *Academe*, 88(1) (January-February 2002), pp. 37–41.

<sup>11</sup> This account glosses over many of the complexities in discussions about cheating, for example differences between young children and university students. One important issue is what counts as cheating, with many teachers seeing plagiarism as a form of cheating but others accepting some level of copying others' work as a stage in learning to write. On differences in perceptions about plagiarism between university teachers and students, see Wendy Sutherland-Smith, *Plagiarism, the Internet and Student Learning: Improving Academic Integrity* (London: Routledge, 2008). However, these complexities do not undermine the basic point that cheating can be addressed in ways that either inhibit or foster self-management.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Martin Carnoy, *Education as Cultural Imperialism* (New York: Longman, 1974); Joel H. Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> See for example the magazine *Radical Teacher*; Michael Newman, *Teaching Defiance: Stories and Strategies for Activist Educators* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006); Ira Shor, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980).

many teachers say they want to encourage students to think for themselves. When achieved, this has more radical implications than teaching progressive content, because students are able to evaluate information and power systems for themselves without having to rely on a progressive teacher to provide a critical perspective.

In practice, students in many classes have little control over their learning. Even when teachers try to encourage student autonomy, the wider system – of examinations, grades and credentials – encourages students to do what is required, and little else. Despite the efforts of teachers, very few students are keen to spend additional time learning things that are not required in the classroom or by standardised examinations. When school is out, it usually means there is little incentive to keep studying.

This suggests the subversive nature of self-managed learning. It enables students to follow their own interests and make their own connections between ideas and practice. Experience with this sort of orientation to the world provides a template for self-management in other spheres of life. Self-managed learning in groups is likely to be cooperative, challenging the usual competitive and individualistic orientation in education systems.<sup>14</sup>

Within conventional educational systems, opportunities for self-managed learning are usually limited by expectations of administrators or teachers and by the need for students to meet mainstream expectations for standardised examinations or job preparation. Even so, some teachers have the scope to introduce elements of self-management, and sometimes action at the system level enables or even encourages greater student self-management.<sup>15</sup>

## Facets of reform

This brief look at three issues within education shows that what is conventionally called reform – namely improving the system within its own terms – is a complex matter. Some types of reform reinforce authority structures and conventional thinking; others challenge them; and most include some elements of reinforcement and some of challenge.

The example of education points to several facets of reform, or acting within the system, that need to be considered.

- The ideas students learn may be conventional, critical or both.
- Hierarchy in educational systems encourages implicit learning about subordination to formal authority.
- Experiences of autonomous learning and self-management offer an alternative to top-down education.

## DEFENCE

Randolph Bourne famously said ‘[w]ar is the health of the state’. Even in peacetime, militaries protect the state from challenges, including challenges to the economic system, whether capitalist

---

<sup>14</sup> See work cited by Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> In many education systems, there is rhetorical support for student-centred learning and even self-management. What I refer to here as self-management refers to actual practices within education in which participants individually and collectively decide the content and methods of learning, whatever the label applied by educational bureaucracies.

or state socialist. Without militaries, grassroots alternatives would be better able to thrive. For anarchists, challenging militaries is at the core of challenging the state system, given that states survive by monopolising the means of violence said to be legitimate. There is a long history of anarchist resistance to conscription and military systems more generally.

The word ‘defence’ has been taken over by states to such an extent that most people think automatically of military defence. What would defence look like in a society without the state? There are several models. One pacifist model is that people would live in harmony, because there would be no external threat.<sup>16</sup> A second possibility is an armed population – a true people’s army, with civilian-soldiers organising defence using collective self-management.<sup>17</sup> The best examples are self-managed armies during revolutionary episodes, notably the Spanish Civil War. The closest contemporary examples within conventional states are Sweden, Switzerland and former Yugoslavia.<sup>18</sup> A third model is defence based on nonviolent civil resistance, called social defence, nonviolent defence or civilian-based defence.

For the discussion here, I will focus on social defence. Many discussions of social defence see it as a way of defending states, namely as a direct replacement for military defence.<sup>19</sup> I use it here as a full-scale anarchist alternative, in which states are eliminated.<sup>20</sup> What sorts of reform help move in the direction of social defence as a radical defence alternative? I look at three areas for campaigning: military spending, nuclear weapons and conscription.

## Military spending

One complaint about military systems is that they are expensive. Over the decades, there have been many exposés about US military spending, everything from expensive toilets to billion-dollar weapons-systems cost overruns.<sup>21</sup> Mary Kaldor, in her widely noted book *The Baroque Arsenal*, probed the trajectory of military spending towards ever more complex and expensive equipment.<sup>22</sup>

Complaints about excess spending can be a criticism of the military’s role, but would it really be a great step forward if militaries became models of probity and cost effectiveness? This would do little to move towards nonviolent alternatives.

Many peace activists refer to military spending and propose, instead, spending on human needs. However, the subset of peace activists who focus on nonviolent action and social defence are less likely to focus on military inefficiencies and corruption, perhaps because this has little relevance to creating alternatives.

---

<sup>16</sup> The connection between this pacifist model and the anarchist tradition is not central to the argument here.

<sup>17</sup> Whether this model of defence could be maintained without fostering the development of a state is a difficult question, but not central to the argument here. For a theoretical argument that private protective associations can lead to a state, see Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974).

<sup>18</sup> Adam Roberts, *Nations in Arms: The Theory and Practice of Territorial Defence* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976).

<sup>19</sup> Gene Sharp with the assistance of Bruce Jenkins, *Civilian-Based Defense: A Post-Military Weapons System* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Brian Martin, *Social Defence, Social Change* (London: Freedom Press, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> A. Ernest Fitzgerald, *The Pentagonists: An Insider’s View of Waste, Mismanagement, and Fraud in Defense Spending* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); Nick Turse, *The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Mary Kaldor, *The Baroque Arsenal* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1982).



## Opposition to nuclear weapons

If war is the health of the state, nuclear weapons are the health of state terror: the very threat of nuclear attack is a type of state terrorism.<sup>23</sup> Nuclear weapons were at the core of the cold war. Leaders of dominant nuclear states still use the alleged nuclear threat from some enemy state – Iraq, Iran, and others – as justification for their own arsenals and for repressive policies including surveillance of the population and criminalisation of internal dissent on national security.

Ever since the development of nuclear weapons, peace campaigners have opposed them. There have been two major mobilisations against nuclear weapons, the first in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the second in the early 1980s. At other times the issue has not had the same prominence, yet many campaigners have continued efforts against the nuclear threat.

Lawrence Wittner, in his comprehensive study of anti-nuclear-weapons campaigning,<sup>24</sup> argues that movements have had a crucial impact on governments: when there is little opposition, states proceed with greater nuclear deployment, whereas public protest has restrained government leaders. To the extent that anti-bomb campaigning has prevented nuclear war, or reduced the risk, it has made a vital contribution to struggles for a better world, because nuclear war, as well as causing massive devastation to humans and the environment, could also usher in a much more repressive world order.<sup>25</sup> The terrorist attacks on 9/11 provided the pretext for a massive expansion of the security state; a nuclear attack, even if relatively limited, would offer a far stronger rationale.

One limitation of anti-bomb campaigning is that it targets just one manifestation of the military system, namely a particular type of weapon. Getting rid of nuclear weapons would be a tremendous benefit to the world, but it would not remove the threat of war. Indeed, it could be argued that as long as military systems exist – with their deployment of science and technology for warfare – then nuclear weapons, or some other advanced method of destruction and killing, will remain as a threat. It is worth remembering that far more people were killed through aerial bombing with conventional explosives in World War II than from the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In this context, anti-bomb campaigning is best seen not solely in terms of its immediate goal of getting rid of nuclear weapons, but more deeply as a means for mobilising support for other demands to restrain and shrink military systems. Campaigning against nuclear weapons is valuable on its own if it reduces the risk of nuclear war; depending on the style and orientation of the campaigning, such campaigning may or may not help move towards alternatives to military systems.

Two aspects of campaigning are relevant. One is the nature of demands. Much anti-bomb campaigning is oriented to governments, in the form of appeals for controlling or reducing arsenals. The underlying assumption is that governments can provide a solution to the weapons threat. Of course, governments are the cause of the threat in the first place and will only act under pressure. The second aspect of campaigning is getting people involved in actions that question

---

<sup>23</sup> Joel Kovel, *Against the State of Nuclear Terror* (London: Pan, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence S. Wittner, *The Struggle Against the Bomb*, 3 volumes (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993–2003).

<sup>25</sup> Brian Martin, 'How the peace movement should be preparing for nuclear war', *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, 13(2) (1982), pp. 149–159.

and challenge government policy – being out in the streets in a mass rally changes people’s understandings of themselves and the world, even if their nominal demand for change is limited.

## **Conscription**

Conscription serves the state, especially in times of war, by ensuring a large pool of soldiers and by instilling military discipline. Accordingly, antiwar activists have long campaigned against conscription. Resistance to conscription, as well as keeping men (and, in some places, women) out of the military, is potent symbolically, showing it is possible to resist state agendas. Refusal to serve in armies is often linked to wider popular resistance to wars, for example during the US government’s war in Indochina.<sup>26</sup>

As populations become more affluent, conscription becomes more difficult for governments to sustain, leading to a gradual shift to volunteer armies.<sup>27</sup> Many so-called volunteers are those who have few other career options due to class, ethnicity or education: the volunteers can be considered economic conscripts.

In countries where conscription continues, anti-conscription efforts play a crucial role in challenging the power of the military and the state. Where conscription has been abolished, there is another frontier: opposing recruitment and empowering soldiers to challenge military authority. The key point here is that where conscription exists, challenging it is a challenge to the state, but when conscription has been abolished, new sorts of campaigns are needed to challenge the military.

## **Facets of reform**

In summary, in assessing campaigns against military systems in relation to the long-term goal of a world without state military forces, several factors should be considered.

- Reforms may either streamline the military or question its existence.
- Reform efforts that involve participation in campaigning can contribute to greater questioning and action down the track.
- The military may or may not be able to adapt to the reform.

## **ELECTORAL POLITICS**

The usual perspective is that ‘democracy’ means a system of voting for representatives who perform the decision-making functions of government. Democracy in this sense is seen by its supporters as clearly superior to autocracy; many see it as the ideal or best possible form of government.

Anarchists, on the other hand, advocate a more participatory form of democracy, with governments and bureaucracies being replaced by self-management in which people collectively make decisions about their lives. The most common anarchist model involves delegates and federations:

---

<sup>26</sup> David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: The American Military Today* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1975).

<sup>27</sup> David Cortright and Max Watts, *Left Face: Soldier Unions and Resistance Movements in Modern Armies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991).

at the level of small organisations, for example a workplace or local community, people make decisions in an open forum; decisions at higher levels are made by recallable delegates elected from the lower levels. There are some other self-management models, such as forms of village self-government in India and Sri Lanka called sarvodaya,<sup>28</sup> and a system involving random selection of community members for decision-making groups dealing with specific tasks, called demarchy.<sup>29</sup>

Compared to these participatory alternatives, the standard system in most countries is better described as representative government. 'Democracy' is a misleading label because it implies rule by the people; representative government involves rule by elected representatives.<sup>30</sup>

For those who support forms of self-management as alternatives to representative government, participating in conventional electoral politics is working within the system. Gorz emphasises that non-reformist reforms involve a struggle that is wider than parliament and political parties.<sup>31</sup> Some of the modes of participation strengthen the system whereas others challenge it and help lay the basis for alternatives. I consider here three arenas for activity: advocating different policies, running for office, and voting.

### **Pressure group politics**

Citizens regularly appeal to and campaign for governments to adopt their preferred policies. This includes individuals writing letters to politicians and advocacy groups holding public meetings, rallies and blockades. All sorts of issues can be involved, from disability provisions to nanotechnology policy. So routine is this sort of pressure group politics that its absence is a reliable indication of autocracy.

The question is, to what extent does this sort of activity contribute to moving from electoral politics to a more participatory political system? A pessimistic perspective would be that any sort of activity designed to pressure the government simply reinforces the usual assumption that government is essential to society, indeed that government is the solution to social problems, even when government is part of the problem. But this one-dimensional assessment ignores the potential for empowerment by attempting to participate in policy matters.

At an elementary level, participating in public debates gives experience in engagement. It often reflects dissatisfaction with elements of the status quo and involves a heightened expectation of change and improvement. On some issues and occasions, governments meet expectations, but in many cases they do not. Some individuals may be demoralised and withdraw, others may increase their efforts and yet others may become disillusioned with the system and start thinking about alternatives.

Another important factor is experiences in campaigning groups. Some policy-reform groups are structured hierarchically, rather like government itself. But others are more participatory, especially collectives within social movements.

---

<sup>28</sup> Detlef Kantowsky, *Sarvodaya: The Other Development* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980).

<sup>29</sup> John Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible? The Alternative to Electoral Politics* (London: Polity Press, 1985).

<sup>30</sup> In between the stark dichotomy presented here are all sorts of measures to promote participation within representative systems. See for example Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); John Gastil and Peter Levine (eds), *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Gorz, *Strategy for Labor*, p. 60.

In summary, pressure group politics operates within the political system – typically representative government – and thus may reinforce assumptions about the naturalness of the system. On the other hand, the methods by which pressure groups operate can provide experiences and develop skills that in some cases can be used to challenge the system.

## **Running for office**

Becoming a candidate in an election is certainly to be part of the system of electoral politics. Is this automatically a sell-out in relation to changing the system? Not necessarily. Some candidates and parties at the local level use campaigns as processes of mobilisation. It is also possible to use a campaign to encourage people to question conventional politics, for example by campaigning on behalf of a satirically named party such as the Abolish Political Parties Party.

There is always a possibility – or a risk – of being elected. Can an elected representative contribute to bringing about participatory alternatives to electoral politics? In principle, this is possible. Elected officials can take the initiative to undertake community consultations, listening posts, consensus forums, citizens' juries and a host of other participatory processes that empower citizens.<sup>32</sup> This occurs, but only rarely. Another possibility is for an elected official to serve as a resource base for community activists, providing facilities for gathering information, photocopying, making posters and holding meetings. However, even when elected officials promote and support greater participation, there can be a tension with such efforts serving as channels for developing electoral support.

In summary, running for office and becoming an elected official almost always reinforce the system of electoral politics, but it is possible to use these processes to promote greater participation and even to stimulate alternatives. However, this happens only occasionally: the electoral arena contains strong incentives to work within the system rather than transform it.

## **Voting**

Anarchists have long argued about whether to vote, at least in some elections.<sup>33</sup> Those opposed to voting say that it reinforces the system of electoral rule, giving it legitimacy. Those who support voting often accept this point but say that, on some occasions, the outcome of the election is so important – for example, preventing the election of a dictatorial candidate – that voting is better than abstaining.

In most countries, voting is voluntary. Those who refuse to vote as a matter of principle are usually small in number compared to those who don't vote because they don't care enough. In these circumstances, refusing to vote has minimal political impact. On the other hand, some anarchists actively campaign against voting: they use elections as an opportunity to raise questions about the system of electoral politics. So the question is less about whether to vote and more about whether to campaign against voting and, more generally, to promote questioning of representative government.

---

<sup>32</sup> Lyn Carson and Janette Hartz-Karp, 'Adapting and combining deliberative designs: juries, polls, and forums', in Gastil and Levine, *Deliberative Democracy Handbook*, pp. 120–138.

<sup>33</sup> Errico Malatesta, *Vote: What For?* (London: Freedom Press, 1942).

In a few countries such as Australia and Brazil, voting is compulsory; to be more precise, it is compulsory to attend a polling station and cast a ballot. Refusing to do this is a type of civil disobedience and can be used as a way of challenging the system of voting.<sup>34</sup>

The main limitation of the do-not-vote position is that it does little to create awareness of participatory alternatives to electoral politics. How to link anti-voting efforts with promoting direct democracy needs more attention.

For anarchists who participate in the electoral process, supporting progressive candidates and positions, one disadvantage is reinforcing the legitimacy of the system. Another is burnout by campaigners: so much effort is put into getting elected that afterwards there is reduced energy for ongoing activity, including pressure group efforts to hold politicians accountable. When preferred candidates lose, this is disheartening; when they win, many campaigners feel the job is over, although it has long been observed that progressive governments often disappoint the people's movements that helped get them elected.<sup>35</sup>

The implication is that electoral campaigning, to be more effective in the long run and to help lay the foundation for alternatives, needs to mesh with ongoing campaigns. It needs to be more about issues and methods than about candidates. However, this is hard to achieve in the midst of the usual election-time focus on the question of who will be elected.

## Facets of reform

On the basis of this brief examination of three efforts in relation to electoral politics, here are some key considerations relevant to reform.

- Campaigning and action groups are organised with greater or less participation, giving differing degrees of experience in self-management.
- Officials within the political system can take steps towards alternatives, though very few do so.
- Some efforts contribute to questioning the system whereas others do not.

## CONCLUSION

Those who challenge the system and pursue radical alternatives sometimes make a simple distinction between reform and revolution: as the saying goes, if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. In this dichotomous picture of social change, reform is useless or worse, because it perpetuates or even strengthens the system that needs to be replaced.

This picture denigrates nearly all efforts to make the world a better place. Going beyond the reform-revolution dichotomy, André Gorz usefully distinguished between two types of reform, reformist and non-reformist. Some types of reform, he argued, have the potential to build greater capacity, commitment and momentum towards radical alternatives.

My goal here has been to probe further into types of reform. By examining nine different areas for reform in the fields of education, the military and electoral politics – each in relation to

---

<sup>34</sup> Brian Martin, 'Compulsory voting: a useful target for anti-state action?' *The Raven*, 4(2) (April-June 1991), pp. 130–139.

<sup>35</sup> Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969).

radical alternatives – it becomes clear that it is not easy to strictly categorise a reform as either reformist or non-reformist. In nearly every area, there is the potential for taking initiatives that help move towards alternatives. Likewise, in nearly every area there are some aspects of reform that reinforce current practices and thinking.

At the end of the sections on education, defence and electoral politics, I listed several key considerations relevant to reform, with a total of nine points in all. These nine points have some overlap. From them, I have extracted four dimensions of reform efforts worth considering in relation to whether they help move towards self-managing alternatives, namely towards a revolutionary shift in the way society is organised.

The first dimension is in the realm of ideas: do the efforts encourage people to question the system? If so, this can help lay the foundation for further change by making more people receptive to possibilities. Examples include teaching within existing educational structures that opens students to visions of alternatives and questioning the existence of the military.

A second dimension of reform is the experience of participation. The goal of a reform can be a very mild refinement of the system, but if it provides a stimulating experience of self-management, it can lead some participants to seek further similar experiences and thus lay the basis for continual change efforts. Participatory campaigns can be undertaken in nearly every arena, such as efforts against student cheating and campaigns against voting. They are an example of the anarchist principle of making the means reflect the ends, also called prefiguration or 'living the revolution'.<sup>36</sup>

A third dimension of reform efforts concerns the system response: when protest demands can be met by the development of a smoother, less vulnerable system of domination, future efforts may be stymied. As in the case of anti-conscription campaigns, efforts may initially be a powerful challenge to the system but be less effective down the track.

A fourth dimension is actual change brought about, because a new situation can provide opportunities for further efforts. It is possible to imagine a politician who pushes through a law – using a process that lacks participation and involves no questioning of the system – that enables future activists scope for more effective campaigning.

These four dimensions – questioning the system, experiences of participation, system responses and opportunities created by change – may or may not operate in tandem. If all are present, then a reform effort is likely to be a powerful step towards self-managing alternatives. In practice, though, many change efforts are strong on some dimensions and weak on others. The key point is that categorising reforms as either reformist or non-reformist is, in most cases, too simplistic: it does not capture the diverse features of efforts.

The wider point is that it is short-sighted to dismiss change efforts because they seem too much part of the system. The reality is that there are opportunities in all areas, even those in the heart of oppressive social systems that seem most inhospitable. On the other hand, some areas are much more promising and deserve greater attention and effort.

---

<sup>36</sup> Uri Gordon, *Anarchy Alive! Anti-authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory* (London: Pluto, 2008), pp. 34–40, gives a cogent account of anarchist practices based on prefiguration. Anarchists give most attention to prefiguration in their groups and campaigning: they try to act in accordance with the principles of the sort of society they are trying to create. My examination of reforms can be seen as applying the same sort of approach in arenas, such as within educational bureaucracies and in electoral campaigns, in which the opportunities for prefiguration are more constrained than in self-organised groups and direct actions.

For an individual, the question is what to do. There is no automatic and easy answer. For those with many options – for example experienced activists who could join any number of campaigns – then it is important to choose wisely, taking into account various dimensions such as participation and system response. For those with more limited options, due to age, skills or social location, and who want to help, there are always opportunities.

One implication of this analysis is that advocates of reform can contribute to radical change in the long term even though they are not revolutionaries. The key is how reform efforts are promoted. For example, participatory campaigns can lay the basis for ever greater self-management even when campaigners have limited objectives. This suggests that methods used can be just as important as goals. In light of the long-standing anarchist principle that the means should reflect the ends, getting the means right sometimes may be more important than the purity of the goals.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Brian Martin  
Reform – when is it worthwhile?  
2012

Retrieved on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2023 from [journals.lwbooks.co.uk](http://journals.lwbooks.co.uk)  
Published in *Anarchist Studies* 20.2.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**