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What's Left?

Anti-Electoralism and Moving Beyond the Political Spectacle

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Elections are a political spectacle. They have a symbolic power but are of little value to the population in affecting or directing public policy. The mass political ritual of individuals anonymously pulling levers in an election booth reinforces the collective myth of democracy and cloaks the class and social antagonisms of society. Anarchists and other revolutionary tendencies know that political power does not come from voting booths, but by having real input into the decisions that affect their lives. This requires re-imagining and reorganizing the fundamental social relationship and political and economic structures of capitalism, in short, a revolutionary transformation of society.

Every four years, in response to the American electoral cycle, liberal and radical activists begin to push coalitions and activists into electoral work for the Democratic Party and anarchists often counter-organize against the charade of electoral "democracy." Given that voter turnout for major elections in the United States is often less than 50%, this is one campaign that anarchists can actually claim as a victory. In principle, there is nothing wrong with

the anarchist “Fuck the Vote” campaign, but it is not largely about organizing for revolutionary change. Rather, the “Fuck the Vote” campaign serves a broader purpose (much like the Liberal elections anarchists organize against); it is a ritual of dissent that functions to reinforce the collective identity of anarchists and cloaks anarchy’s own deep political divisions. In this moment we abandon our anarcho-prefixes; there is no more post-Leftist anarchist vs. Leftist anarchist vs. primitivist anarchist. We are anarchists and we are Fucking the Vote.

As Marx noted, “The formulation of a question is its solution.” In other words, the way you ask a question determines the possible answers to it. We need to formulate a new question regarding elections. The question in 2004 is neither the electoralism of the liberals nor the anti-electoralism of the anarchists, but how, as revolutionaries, we can help to build movements that directly confront state power and prefigure the type of society we want to live in. Anti-electoralism, like electoralism, is an exercise in political impotence and an expression of our powerlessness. Electoral politics is about legitimating capitalism and the state. It is not about real power to the people. Rather than attacking the state from our strengths, a strategy of anti-electoralism takes as its beginning our weakest point—our political, institutional, and strategic disadvantage in electoral politics. Such a campaign reinforces our weakness by embracing our lack of a political voice and political power in electoral politics, and by trying to utilize that very weakness as the basis for organizing. Both electoral politics and anti-electoralism are bad strategies if your goal is to radically transform society.

Beyond the Spectacle

“In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”

-Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle

The anti-voting campaign suffers from same political problem as the “anti-globalization” movement as practiced in the global North: long on theatrics, symbolic acts, and spectacle, and short on posing any threat to those who rule the world. The Left has become a pale shadow of itself. The “New Left” is now over forty years old. That another Left has failed to emerge during this time is telling. The Left lacks the working-class base of the “old” Lefts of the late 19th and early 20th century and the intellectual base of the “New Left” of the 1960s. In addition, much of the white Left has long since abandoned the Black and Brown liberation struggles. Rather than being the organized expression of a movement “of the class, by the class, and for the class,” the Left has become a series of political and symbolic spectacles that are mere representations and meditations of resistance. We now fill movie theaters with films such as Fahrenheit 9/11 and The Corporation, making the Left’s greatest contribution at the moment is in the cultural production and consumption of resistance. Our puppet-making skills are significantly better than our ability to challenge state power. That isn’t a problem if our goal is make good street theater, but our goal is to remake society. Certainly there is a place for puppets and street theater and other symbolic acts. But these tactics are largely disconnected from strategies for building concrete resistance to the state and capitalism. What’s more, the state has adapted to these tactics more quickly than the Left can counter. It didn’t take long before the state began raiding convergence centers days and weeks before our gatherings. The state doesn’t raid our convergence centers because they respect our power; they raid our convergence centers because they don’t. While the empire is busy in its attempt to remake the Middle East, the Left continues to lose political and ideological ground to neo-cons, neoliberals, and fundamentalists of every stripe. Can we stop this slide and reestablish a viable, socialist, humanist, and radical Left political pole? Or will we continue to prioritize pageantry over power and relegate the Left to producers of political spectacle and consumers of our own outrage?