

None of the Above

The Anarchist Case Against Electoralism

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Historically, anarchists and other anti-authoritarians have rejected participation in elections. We neither run candidates nor vote for those who do run. There have been exceptions to this tradition, but the mainstream of revolutionary anarchism has been against participation in elections or in elected government bodies.

This position may seem odd to most people on the Left since, overwhelmingly, U.S. liberals and reformists are in favor of voting for the Democratic Party against the Republicans. Particularly in this presidential election year (2004) there is an almost hysterical desire among liberals to elect some Democrat (any Democrat!) to unseat the appalling George W. Bush. The AFL-CIO, under the Sweeny administration, has made a major effort to elect more Democratic politicians. Those Left activists who reject the Democratic Party are mostly for building a new, third party, such as the Green Party, or a Labor Party based on the unions. They reject the Democrats but accept electoralism.

Revolutionary anarchists reject this consensus. Sometimes it feels uncomfortable to be disagreeing with almost everyone else, from the Left to the Right, but we have to tell the truth as best as we see it. Anarchists point out that the Democrats, like the Republicans, are supporters of big business (they believe in the capitalist economic system; they cannot run without getting money from businesspeople)—the Democrats are militarist (they began and carried out World Wars I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the recent Yugoslavian War, they voted for the current Iraqi War, and are, if anything, more uncritical in their support for Israel than the Republicans) — and are supporters of the national state (they have no program for, or interest in, dismantling national sovereignty.) Meanwhile, the Labour Party of Britain is the main ally of Bush in the Iraqi War and occupation. The other Social Democratic and Communist parties of Europe and the world (such as the Canadian New Democratic party) have abandoned any pretense of advocating a new and better social system, becoming out and out supporters of capitalism and its imperialism — as has the once radical German Green Party. They do not make alternate parties look very useful for social change in the U.S.

On the other hand, almost every progressive step in U.S. society came from efforts outside of the electoral process. The last wave of radicalization — the so-called Sixties — included massive struggles by African-Americans for their freedom, beginning in the late '50s. It included large nonviolent civil disobedience campaigns in the South, such as demonstrations, boycotts, and strikes. These were followed in the Northern ghettos by violent rebellions. While not ending all oppression, these extra-electoral struggles destroyed legal segregation and forced the passing of anti-discrimination and affirmative action laws.

Meanwhile, there developed a struggle against the Vietnam War, which included mass demonstrations, student strikes, occupations of colleges, confrontations with the police and national guard, draft resistance, and a virtual mutiny in the U.S. army. Together with the military struggle of the Vietnamese, these non-electoral activities placed limits on the war and finally led to its abandonment by the U.S. state. On the other hand, antiwar electoral efforts, in the Democratic Party or third party efforts (such as the Peace and Freedom Party), were failures.

Other struggles of the period included successful unionization drives in social service and government sectors as well as a wave of wildcat strikes. The Queer Liberation movement took off with the Stonewall Uprising in NYC. The Women's Liberation movement also began outside the electoral arena with consciousness-raising groups and demonstrations. Additionally, one of its greatest legal victories was non-electoral (Roe v. Wade, making abortion legal) and was

a judicial response to the mass movement. Its main electoral effort, passing an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, was a failure.

The wave of radicalization before the Sixties was in the Thirties. It was marked by major unionization drives. These included mass picketing, occupation of factories (sit-down strikes), and physical fights with police, the national guard, and vigilantes. Democratic Party/New Deal politicians only responded to the mass movement in order to control it, but it was the strikers who led the way. The methods they used are illegal now and have been abandoned by the unions—a fact directly connected to the decline in the union movement.

In brief, almost all progress in freedom has been made by mass struggles outside of elections and against elected politicians. Yet, the Left of today is mainly focused on the elections as the way forward. Why is this?

One reason is the weakness of the Left today. Mass movements are limited, therefore people do not think in terms of mass movements. People ask, How shall I vote? But I am not particularly interested in persuading isolated individuals to not vote. Vote or do not vote, it makes little difference. One vote out of thousands or millions will not change things, in our over-centralized and massified society.

Liberals deny this, pointing to Florida 2000 as an example of how a few votes made a difference. (They use this argument to denounce those who voted for Nader on the Green ticket.) But the shoe is on the other foot. In that Floridian election many African-Americans were illegally kept from voting by false records of having been convicts or by police roadblocks. Many other people voted but were not counted, due to the voting machines. Others voted but were confused by the ballots and ended up being counted for candidates they did not intend to vote for. After much dishonesty and trickery, the election was finally settled by the vote of five Supreme Court justices! Rather than showing the value of individual votes, Florida 2000 was a classic demonstration of the fraudulence of bourgeois electoral democracy.

Consequently, elections serve two purposes. One is to settle disputes between different sections of the ruling class, without bloodshed. The other is to give the people the impression that they rule the government.

The U.S. election of 2000 did decide between two groups of representatives of the rich, with slightly different programs, but for a moment it exposed the lie that the people rule.

What I want to ask is: what should large groups do? Although many of these oppressed forces have been denounced by the Right as special interests, potentially they represent vast numbers of people: workers, women, people of color, everyone who wants to breathe clean air, and so on. They are also the traditional base of the Democratic Party, which would collapse if the unions, African-Americans, etc., were to withdraw their support. Potentially these groupings have great power, if they were willing to use it. This is especially true for the working class and its unions. By means of a general strike, the workers could stop any society in its tracks, and start it up again on a different basis. The potential for mass action outside of electoralism is great and the limitations of electoral action are also great.

Is There An Electoral Road To Socialism?

The controversy over electoralism goes way back in the history of the socialist movement. It was the main programmatic disagreement between Marx and the anarchists. Marx thought that the

road forward for the working class was to form workers parties independent of the pro-capitalist parties. (Therefore, unlike many modern Marxists, he would not have endorsed the Democratic Party nor any capitalist third party.) He denounced the anarchists for rejecting politics, when actually what they rejected was voting. There was other socialists, even Marxists, such as William Morris, who disagreed with Marx on this, but they were in a minority.

Later, Lenin and his followers tried to revive Marxism after most Social Democratic (and supposedly Marxist) parties had endorsed their governments in World War I. After the Russian revolution, many – perhaps most – of those attracted to the new Marxism were against electoralism. Lenin was on the Right of the new Communist movement. He denounced the anti-electoralists as “Infantile Leftists.” No group was allowed to affiliate with the new Communist International unless it agreed to run in elections.

Over time, the issue of electoralism became debated in terms of the supposed Parliamentary Road to Socialism. That is, is it possible for socialists to legally and peacefully get elected to parliament (Congress in the U.S.)? Can a socialist society be voted into being? (note: In this article I am using “socialism” in the broadest sense, including state socialists and libertarian socialists, Marxist-Leninists, social democrats, and anarcho-communists.)

Marx had been ambiguous on this. He had speculated that Britain and the U.S. might legally develop into socialism through elections, while most of Europe could not. It is unclear from his writings, at least to me, just how he expected election victories in those European states to lead to revolution. In his time, Lenin did not believe in any peaceful or legal evolution toward socialism. He advocated using elections and parliament as platforms for revolutionary propaganda. Similarly he advocated support for reformist parties (such as the British Labor Party) as a tactic for exposing them. Communists will support reformists, he said, as a rope supports a hanged man.

Yet the Marxist (and other) workers parties did degenerate into reformist parties everywhere. This is true of even fairly new Left parties. For example, there is the Workers Party of Brazil, which is led by Luiz Inacio da Silva (or Lula), a former factory worker and labor leader. He was elected president in October 2002 with an enormous majority of the votes, due to his promises of radical change. There was great popular rejoicing in Brazil and elsewhere (as if a social Democratic government had never been elected before). A year later, it is reported, “[...] Mr. da Silva has followed the same economic policies that he criticized when they were being executed by the previous government, and he has failed... to carry out the promises he made during the campaign. Inflation and interest rates have dropped and the budget surplus has risen, thrilling Wall Street, but the cost has been more joblessness...” (NY Times, 1/4/04).

Why have these supposedly radical parties so consistently turned to the right, slowly or quickly as the case may be? Is there something about the electoral process, which pushes them to adapt to capitalism? I would say that there are two sets of forces; one from below and another from above, which pressure them to the right.

From below, there is the pressure of popular consciousness. Election campaigns are run in order to get elected, if not this time then in the future. Once elected, a party positions itself to be reelected. (For the moment I leave out those who just use elections as platforms for revolutionary propaganda; very few, if any, U.S. supporters of a Green or Labor party follow this Leninist approach). But popular consciousness is mixed. Most people are individually decent and often have good spiritual and moral values. Politically they distrust big corporations; and are for the right to join unions, the right to a decent job, racial equality (at least in the abstract), women’s

rights (ditto), civil liberties, free speech, nationalized health care, a clean environment, and do not want war. At the same time, most people are patriotic, have religious superstitions, as well as have racist and sexist ideas. People are often irrational, selfish, and look to leaders to take care of them. (And in the U.S., right now, people are scared of terrorism and therefore many support government repression and foreign wars.) People usually want a better world for their children. But most voters do not yet accept the goal of a transformation of capitalist society into socialism. Today only a radical minority sees the need for, or wants, a revolutionary change in the social system. This is what defines this period as non-revolutionary.

If a party wants to get elected it must make all sorts of limited proposals to win votes. Most supporters will be attracted to the party for its reform proposals, not for its supposedly revolutionary final ends. Most will vote for its reform program and join it for this program. There is, of course, nothing wrong with advocating reforms if they are integrated into a revolutionary program. But with electoralism, the reforms become the real program and the radical goal becomes just a pie-in-the-sky vision, which means little in action.

More important is the pressure from above. To try to get elected, in a non-revolutionary period, is to offer to manage a capitalist state and capitalist economy. While a socialist party's long-term goal may be a socialist change, an electoralist strategy means that its short-term goal must be to govern a capitalist society. But what if the capitalists do not want to be governed by a socialist party? They will not give it money to run its campaigns but will, instead, finance its opponents. They will use the press (their press, after all) to lie about the socialist party. If the party is elected the capitalists can sabotage the economy in many ways. They can go on a capital strike and close down their factories. They can refuse to invest. They can take their money out of the country and invest elsewhere. These possible actions show the limitations of electoral reform proposals. Even if elections were completely honest and money-free (an impossibility), the capitalists would still own the economy and the politicians would have to cooperate with them.

Similarly, the socialist politicians must persuade the generals and police chiefs that they are not antimilitary or antipolice. Also, the socialists will have to get along with the civil service bureaucrats, or nothing will get done. This is the price of managing a capitalist state.

So even a socialist party with radical goals would have to make deals with the bosses. This is why Lula, in his campaign for the Brazilian presidency, went out of his way to persuade Brazilian and foreign capitalists that he was not antibusiness. That is why Allende, then president of Chile, brought General Pinochet into his cabinet (then the generals overthrew and killed Allende anyway). Whatever its rhetoric, any socialist party would have to do the same or face artificial unemployment and the resultant mass discontent. The capitalists could see to it that the socialists will not be reelected if they do not play ball. The same is even truer with U.S. Democrats, who have never claimed to be anything but supporters of capitalism. Even the most liberal Democrats must be prepared to make deals and moderate their programs if they want to look effective in governing a capitalist economy.

Suppose, on the other hand, that a socialist party is really revolutionary and has the popularity to get elected? Or, what if the party is reformist but the capitalists feel that they cannot afford to let it be elected, since even the mildest reforms threaten them in a situation of economic crisis? In such situations, the capitalists would see to it that the socialists do not get elected or stay elected. Laws would be passed limiting the socialists rights. Fascist gangs would be subsidized to terrorize the socialists and drive them from the streets.

The police and courts would be inspired to persecute them. Socialist militants would be fired from their jobs. If necessary, elections would be canceled and a dictatorship installed. If the socialists had gotten so far as to be elected (as with Allende or Spain in the 1930s), they would be overthrown by a military coup. The Left would be drowned in blood. This is the history of fascism in Europe in the twenties and thirties, of dictatorships in Latin America, and of dictatorships and repression everywhere in the world. Eventually, after years of vicious repression, a limited capitalist democracy might be restored, once the Left had been thoroughly defeated.

The United States is one of the most difficult governments to make a sweeping transformation by elections. It has a complicated system of checks and balances, with election of different parts of the national government taking place at different times for different lengths of service (including six years for Senators and lifetime appointment of judges). It has obviously undemocratic features, such as the electoral college or the Senate with its two seats per state, regardless of the size of the population of each state. The whole system was deliberately designed by the “founders” to prevent either one-man dictatorship or too-much democratic control.

Think of U.S. history in the 1850s, when slavery became an explosive issue. The old political parties were fractured and one dissolved (the Whigs). A new party was formed which was anti-slavery, at least in a moderate way (the Republicans). They did not threaten to abolish slavery where it existed, only to prevent its expansion. (Advocates of forming a new party today should notice that it took a total crisis leading to the tearing apart of the country to produce a new party. This was the only successful formation of a third party in U.S. history.) The Republicans were elected in 1860. Lincoln got the most votes — a plurality — and won fairly by the rules. However, the slave owners did not accept the election results. They rebelled against it, seeking to break up the country and defeat its elected government.

They took most of the leading U.S. military officers with them. There followed the Civil War, as bloody a conflict as any revolution. This is in spite of the fact that Lincoln’s program threatened the slaveocracy far less than a socialist program would threaten the capitalist rulers of the U.S. today.

It is absurd to imagine that the capitalists of the U.S. or any other country would permit themselves peacefully to lose their power, their wealth, and their positions, merely because they lost an election. The U.S. ruling class has supported dictatorships and repression around the world and does so to this day. It has supported regimes, which murdered millions of their citizens. To maintain its wealth it would do the same at home. Anyone who imagines that there can be a peaceful and legal overturn of capitalism is living in a fool’s paradise. I wish it were otherwise but the U.S. capitalists will not leave the stage of history unless forced to. A revolution will be democratic, the self-organization of the exploited majority. But it must be prepared to defend itself against the expected violence of the capitalists and their agents, or it will be destroyed.

But We Have To Defeat Bush!

Liberals are furiously against the administration of George W. Bush, but rarely ask how the country got into this mess. A gang of conscienceless adventurers has been elected and then proceeds to loot the treasury in the interests of the very rich and to start a foreign war. How did this happen?

The turning point was the election of 1964. From World War II to then there had been little difference between the two major parties. The Republicans had accepted the New Deal and the Democrats did not intend to expand it. Both parties were enthusiastic about the Cold War and domestic anti-Communism. The unions were shackled but were locked into the Democratic Party anyway. Social philosophers regarded this national consensus as proof of the virtues of U.S. democracy.

In 1964, however, the extreme Right won control of the Republicans and ran Barry Goldwater for president. In the election Johnson swamped Goldwater and almost everyone thought that things would now return to normal. But the Right kept on organizing until it was able to take over the Republicans lock, stock, and barrel.

I was too young to vote in 1964 but I followed the election process closely. I read the debate on the Left between those who were against voting for either candidate and those, such as Michael Harrington, who were for voting for Johnson. At the time I was persuaded by the pro-Democratic position. Goldwater had to be stopped or he would expand the war in Vietnam and do other dangerous things. Enough people agreed with this view to elect Johnson in a landslide. Then Johnson went on to vastly expand the war in Vietnam and to invade the Dominican Republic to overthrow an elected government. I had been duped. I concluded that the radical Leftists had been right after all and swore off voting for the Democrats.

Harrington and many others argued for a strategy called Political Realignment. The idea was to drive right wing forces (Southern racists and the big-city political machines in the North) out of the Democrats and into the Republicans. Then the Democrats would become the party of the unions, African-Americans, and the Left. It is almost embarrassing to cite this strategy today. The Southern racists did move from the Democrats to the Republicans. Big-city machines, which once controlled the Northern Democrats, have generally collapsed. Fanatical right-wingers have taken over the Republicans, with views that go all the way to fascist advocates of theocratic dictatorship and the restoration of racial segregation. However, the result has not been a move to the Left by the Democrats but their shift to the Right. Since the Republicans have done so well appealing to the Right, the Democrats have also swung to the Right, in an effort to catch up with them.

Meanwhile, liberals, rather than becoming disgusted with the Democrats, have stuck with them. In election after election, liberals have voted for the Democrats, since the Republicans have so obviously been worse. And in election after election, the Republicans have consistently gotten worse and the Democrats have followed behind, moving more and more to the Right. The liberal support of the Democrats is no longer advocated as part of a grand strategy of Realignment but merely as Lesser Evil-ism. Taken seriously this means admitting that the Democrats are, indeed, evil, even if lesser, but by the time the election rolls around liberals usually persuade themselves that the Democratic candidate is really good.

Even though they both accept the same framework, the point is that there are differences between the Democrats and Republicans. The Democrats are, if not Left, at least less to the Right. The point is that we cannot beat the far Right with the Democrats. The lesser evil cannot defeat the greater evil. To repeat, supporting the Democrats has resulted in a growth of the Right, the domination of the Republicans by the far Right, the domination of the national government by the Republicans, and the moving of the Democrats further to their Right.

Recognizing this, some on the Left have sought to break out of the Democratic Party trap by creating new, third, parties. They remain caught in the electoralist trap. They do not propose that

the new party have an anti-capitalist program. In fact, none of the third party efforts has a socialist program. Ralph Nadar's campaign has criticized big business, but he has always advocated a better-regulated capitalism.

These are all efforts to create a third capitalist party. In practice, it is extremely difficult to create a third party in the U.S., given its winner-takes-all election system, the need for big bucks to run a campaign, and the widespread lesser-evilism which keeps on drawing independent voters back into the Democratic swamp. Whether or not a new party is a good idea, we have to ask whether the movement should be spending its limited money and human resources in such a difficult effort.

Suppose a major crisis were to shake the U.S., such as a collapse of the economy. There would be mass discontent. In that case, a new party might form, precisely to get in front of the mass rebelliousness and to lead it back into the established order. That is, the new party would be an obstacle to change, not a means of achieving it. The party would be based on the Left of the Democrats (such as it is) tearing itself away from the Democrats in order to maintain its base. It would include the union bureaucrats, more-or-less liberal party hacks, popular preachers, and various demagogues. It might call itself a Labor party, due to the participation of the union officials, or it might not, but the middle-class composition of the organizers would be the same. It might use democratic socialist rhetoric, but its program would really be the stabilization of capitalism. In fact it would be a new capitalist party and not a challenge to the system. Due to the very capitalist crisis that created it, it would be unable to make real improvements; but it might be able to derail a popular rebellion. Such a formation should not be welcomed but opposed.

There are some who advocate the original Leninist approach of using elections only as platforms for revolutionary propaganda. One problem with this is that it makes it look like even the revolutionary socialists believe in the value of elections and Congress. Whatever we say in words would seem to be contradicted by our actions. More importantly, such an approach cannot be maintained indefinitely. In non-revolutionary periods there will be enormous pressure to really try to get elected by promising reforms and then trying to get these reforms enacted in parliament (Congress). This is the history of the Communist Parties in Western Europe. They adapted to the electoral system far more than they influenced the system. Over time they became reformists in practice, and when there were revolutionary upheavals (such as in France in 1968), counterrevolutionaries in action.

What Should We Do?

To repeat, the question is not what you or I should do but what we should all be doing on election day. I am not trying to dissuade anyone from voting for a Democrat against George Bush, if that is what he or she wants to do. (I myself will not vote for any Democrat due to personal revulsion.) What I am opposed to is the AFL-CIO endorsing Democrats, giving them the workers money, using its members as foot-soldiers for Democratic candidates, manning phone banks for the Democrats on election day – and then acting surprised when the Democrats vote for anti-labor legislation together with the Republicans.

Instead, the unions could be spending their money and using their people to organize the 91% of private business workers who are not in unions. A big expansion in the size of unions would

do a lot to make their demands more influential. Unions should support union organizing in poor and oppressed nations, to raise the standard of living there for workers. The unions need to be much more militant. This includes striking despite judicial injunctions or anti-strike laws (for public employee unions). It includes mass pickets, occupation of work places, secondary boycotts of suppliers, and general hell-raising.

Most important of all is the idea of the general strike, where all the unions go out, in a city, region, or nationwide. A successful major strike or, even better, a general strike, would cause the workers to feel their power in a way in which no election could. It would lead to a breakthrough in consciousness for many workers.

Oppressed communities need to be democratically self-organized and to be able to use militant mass actions against repression, in coalition with each other and the labor movement. This applies to all oppressed groups with their own needs and issues, but who overlap with all others. They too need as much self-organization as possible and militant mass action, in coalition with all the overlapping groupings, especially labor.

Anarchists do not say, wait until the revolution. We advocate militant mass action right now to win even partial gains. We support the struggle for reforms, but do not think that this system can consistently and permanently provide a decent life for everyone. A revolution is needed (the complete transformation of capitalism into libertarian socialism).

Within anarchism, there have been exceptions to this view. The first self-labeled anarchist, Proudhon, was elected to the French parliament. Murray Bookchin, a well-known anarchist of today, advocates running in local elections and taking over city and town councils, as part of his Libertarian Municipalism strategy. The arguments against electoralism apply to this strategy too.

City governments are merely local parts of the national state. Any attempt to make radical changes locally would be overruled by the state government and the national government (the way judges forbade city councils from passing resolutions against South Africa and refusing to do business with SA businesses – this was creating their own foreign policy, the judges said, and was not permitted). City governments preside over local capitalist economies. An anti-business program would cause local businesses to pull out of town and invest elsewhere. The town would go broke and the radicals would be voted out.

There is nothing wrong with community organizing, in fact, it is vitally important, but only if illusions in the local state are opposed. Also, by his indifference to unions and the working class, Bookchin rules out mobilizing one of the potentially most important forces for shaking up local communities.

In any case, most of the revolutionary wing of anarchism has historically opposed using elections (locally or nationally). From the beginning, the anarchist movement has rejected the possibility of an electoral road to socialism (meaning, not state socialism but libertarian socialism or anarcho-communism). They have opposed both revolutionary Marxism-Leninism, which aims to overthrow the existing state and replace it with a new state (the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat, really a dictatorship of a bureaucratic party), and the social democracy (reformism), which advocates electing their bureaucratic party to run the existing state. Both programs require the people to chose a few leaders who will supposedly represent them in the national capital. These leaders will be political FOR the workers. The workers can go back to their jobs, doing what they are told by their bosses.

Instead, we as anarchists say that working people should organize themselves, should create institutions of direct, face-to-face democracy, such as factory councils or community committees, and federate these together. Stop relying on others and take your fate into your own hands!

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