

# **The Limits of Hegemony**

**Review of Jonathan M. Smucker, Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals**

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This is an important and interesting book about how to build a movement. From the blurbs it includes, it has been highly praised by many well-known militants and theorists of change. In my opinion, as a libertarian (antiauthoritarian) socialist, it has something profoundly true to say, but it is politically unbalanced.

We live in a time when awful things are happening, politically, economically, socially, militarily, and ecologically—and worse things threaten to happen. Yet, as Jonathan Smucker points out (relying on the polls), *“Today in the United States more millennials identify with socialism than with capitalism....On nearly every major issue, relatively progressive positions have come to enjoy a majority of support....The establishment is in crisis. Popular opinion is on our side.”* (2017; 252–254) Why then are those committed to social justice so weak, marginalized, and with minimal political impact? What can be done to change that? That is the important topic addressed by this book.

Smucker’s message is essentially this: too much of the Left is inward-looking, comfortable with itself, and self-involved. It is correct, even essential, to have a core group of reliable militants, but leftists must reach out to others, go beyond their comfort zone, and get other people involved, to whatever degree they can be involved. It is not enough to build a club of the like-minded. It is necessary to work out a strategy for winning gains, for influencing others, for achievement, and for exercising power. It is necessary to build a movement, a movement for power. The strategic aim should be to challenge the dominance (the “hegemony”) of the ruling elite over popular consciousness and established institutions—and to ultimately replace its hegemony with that of the Left.

That is the book in a nutshell. He repeats the message over and over, to drive it home, with various elaborations and modifications. This message is true and important but not especially new. For decades, revolutionary Marxist and anarchist organizations have urged their members to go beyond middle class intellectuals and students, to root themselves in the working class—particularly in the most oppressed and discriminated-against sectors of the working class (African-Americans, unskilled workers, women, etc.). This was essential for building an effective revolutionary movement.

For example, in the ‘70s, Hal Draper criticized sects which postured as small mass parties: *“The life-principle of a revolutionary mass party is not simply its Full Program, which can be copied with nothing but an activist typewriter and can be expanded or contracted like an accordion. Its life-principle is its integral involvement as a part of the working-class movement, its immersion in the class struggle not by a Central Committee decision but because it lives there.”* (quoted in Krul 2011)

## Prefiguration vs. Strategy

The problem of the self-enclosed and isolated grouping, then, applies in many forms on the Left. It applies to small revolutionary socialist organizations, built around their dogmas and their newspapers. It applies to co-op stores and bicycle clubs. But Smucker is especially aiming his criticism at anarchists, based on his experience in the Occupy Wall Street encampment in 2011. (Which is also consistent with my own—much more limited—experience with OWS.) He describes the anarchists as focused on building a self-governing collectivity, which would inspire people to go and do likewise. They did not, he claims, think of OWS in strategic terms, about how to use it as a basis for building a broader movement to challenge established politics. They vehemently

opposed raising demands on the state, which would have been necessary if the movement was to attract others. He counterposes the anarchist emphasis on “prefigurative” organizing to his focus on “strategic” thinking.

*“In contrast to power politics, ‘prefigurative politics’ seeks to demonstrate the ‘better world’ it envisions for the future in the actions it takes today...I argue that even leftist idealists have to strategically engage power politics proper, if they hope to build anything bigger than a radical clubhouse.”* (103) Smucker cites major anarchist theorists, *“Manuel Castells, Richard J.F. Day, and David Graeber seem to concur with my claim that [prefigurative politics] aims to replace...strategic politics, especially if the later is defined in terms of hegemonic contestation.”* (127)

For example, David Graeber has written, *“... most successful forms of popular resistance have historically taken the form not of challenging power head on, but of ‘slipping away from its grasp’, whether by means of flight, desertion, or the founding of new communities.”* (quoted in Price 2016) Laurence Davis summarizes—favorably—this viewpoint, *“For contemporary ‘small-a’ anarchists...these here-and-now alternative institutions...and social relationships ...are the essence of anarchism....Many contemporary anarchists insist that ‘the revolution is now’....”* (same) Some autonomous Marxists have adopted a similar perspective, calling it “exodus”—somehow escaping from capitalism without confronting it or the state.

I have written several essays critical of this view (Price 2015a; 2015b; 2006). Most of Smucker’s criticism is on the mark. The capitalist class with its institutions of power—especially the state—will not allow the people to gradually and peacefully build alternate institutions which could replace the market, industrial capitalism, and the national state. This was demonstrated (once again) when the police broke up Occupy encampments, after a few months. This was done throughout the country, with coordination by the (Obama-Democratic) national government. The power of the state could not be ignored.

**But the opinions he cites are from only one school of anarchism. There is also the tradition of revolutionary class-struggle anarchism (libertarian socialism).** (Price 2016; 2009) This aims to build a mass movement which can eventually overthrow the capitalist class and its state, along with all other institutions of oppression—and replace them with self-managed, cooperative, nonprofit, institutions from below. It sees a major role for the working class, with its potential power to stop the means of production. It also has organized other sections of the oppressed and exploited to fight for freedom, in various countries and at various times.

Smucker, who claims to have once been an anarchist, appears to be completely ignorant of this alternate, and mainstream, tendency in anarchism, which goes back to Bakunin and Kropotkin, the anarchist-communists and the anarcho-syndicalists. (A slight example of Smucker’s ignorance of anarchism appears in his discussion of recent biological evidence that human beings, like other animals, are not only competitive and aggressive, but also are highly cooperative and sociable. This is true, but it was demonstrated over a century ago by Peter Kropotkin in his *Mutual Aid*, a foundational work for anarchism.)

Revolutionary anarchism would not accept this binary counterposition of prefiguration vs. a strategy for power—whether raised, on different sides, by Smucker or by certain anarchists. Even Smucker accepts that a strategic approach may incorporate prefiguration, as a minor aspect. But actually the two depend on each other. We cannot build a participatory democratic society unless we build a participatory democratic movement, and it will be a stronger movement the more that people democratically participate.

This point is made in a book on unions, fittingly titled, *Democracy is Power*. “*Internal democracy is key to union power....A union will act in the interests of members only if these members control the union....The power of the union lies in the participation of its members, and it requires democracy to make members want to be involved....A union run by the members is also more likely to exercise its power.*” (Parker & Gruelle 1999; 14) This does not mean that specific forms, such as consensus and open membership, are always required. However, strategy and prefiguration should be one and the same.

## The Limits of Liberalism

The primary weakness of this book is its one-sided focus on sectarian withdrawal and self-involvement on the Left. What Smucker says against this is true, but it is not the whole truth.

**The main problem with the Left in the U.S. (and elsewhere) is not self-involvement but liberalism, reformism, and opportunism.** From the ‘30s to today, most of the Left has supported—or at least, accommodated—capitalism, only urging better regulation of business by the state. It has promoted the state as the main remedy for all social evils—if only the state would be somewhat more democratic. It has portrayed the state as a neutral institution, to be used by the corporate rich or by the working people, depending on events. It has urged a focus on elections, to put individuals into office to be “political” for the people. It has channeled mass action into the Democratic Party, the “party of the people,” which has consistently been the swamp in which movements suffocate and die. This has been true not only of liberals but also of most of those calling themselves “socialists” or “communists.”

The liberal approach has led to victories, but none which have remained stable and reliable (especially since the period of renewed stagnation and decline beginning about 1970, following the “long boom”). Unions won the right to organize—but today unions in the private sector only represent about 6 % of the labor force, about where they were before the upsurge of the ‘30s. African-Americans defeated legal segregation, but Black people are still on the bottom of society. Even their right to vote is under attack. Women made gains, which are again under attack, especially the right to legal abortions. The “Vietnam syndrome,” which limited the U.S.’s military interventions abroad, is over; now the U.S. wages war around the world, and threatens nuclear war with North Korea. Advancements in environmental protection have been viciously attacked by the current administration—which has attacked popular gains in every field. (Readers may add to the list as they chose.) **Liberalism—reformism—has been a failure overall.**

Yet this seems to be Jonathan Smucker’s perspective. While he strongly (and correctly) criticizes self-enclosed, sectarian, anarchists and others, he has barely a few phrases about the danger of being coopted by ruling powers. He hopes to build a broad popular movement, including large numbers of “ordinary people,” workers of all sorts, students, and oppressed people—but also to include powerful people from the rich and governing sectors. He wants to win over “*allies within the existing establishment.*” (167) Radicals need to know “*how to strategically influence a decision-maker....*” (250) There is a need for “*actively courting influential supporters....*” (70) This implies not an alliance **against** the ruling class but an alliance **with** sections of the ruling class and the state. (This has traditionally been called a “Popular Front,” as opposed to a broad alliance of organizations, parties, and movements of the working class and oppressed sections, which has been

called a “United Front.”) In order to include establishment allies, the movement would have to limit the demands which can be raised and the methods which can be used.

Smucker’s aim is not only for a popular movement to develop counter-power to the ruling class, but to take state power. *“The state is no longer an other that we stand in opposition to as total outsiders; instead we become responsible for it—parts of it, at least....”* (152) His goal is *“to consolidate victories in the state....wresting the helm.”* (150) He expresses admiration for *“the Chavistas in Venezuela...[who] have succeeded in winning some level—however limited a degree—of state power....”* (136) Smucker does not mention more recent developments in Venezuela, which have not gone so well for the regime nor for its working and poor people.

## Elections and the Democratic Party

To win “victories in the state”, it will be necessary to run in elections. *“Hopefully this moment is helping today’s radicals to reconsider our relationship to electoral campaigns and political parties....”* (170) Besides the Chavistas, he makes several glowing references to Bernie Sanders’ campaign. *“In 2016 Bernie Sanders picked up the torch that Occupy lit....”* (246) *“The Bernie Sanders campaign showed again...the ripe possibility of such an insurgent political alignment.”* (217) The Sanders campaign did demonstrate that there was a lot of dissatisfaction which might be mobilized even behind someone who was called a “socialist” and spoke of “revolution.” This was significant.

But what was the strategic result? Sanders channeled this dissatisfaction into the Democratic Party, eventually behind Hillary Clinton, a neoliberal, militarist, establishment politician. Those who organized the Sanders campaign are now trying to keep its momentum in the capitalist party which has historically been the graveyard of movements. They want to turn the militant youth into voting fodder for another pro-imperialist, pro-capitalist, candidate, who has no solution for the economic and ecological disasters which are looming.

Smuckers cites a lot of sociologists and political scientists, but few radicals. He cites no anarchists (except for the non-revolutionary types) and no Marxists (except for the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci--died in 1937). He never considers the nature of the state, apparently treating it as a neutral institution which can be used by either the people or by the corporate rich. He seems to think that competing classes can take over different “parts” of the same state—denying that it is a unitary institution. One thing on which both the revolutionary anarchists and Lenin agreed was that the existing state was an instrument of capitalism, and that it needed to be overthrown and replaced by alternate institutions. The fate of the Occupy encampments was one demonstration of this.

Other examples have appeared more recently in Greece in the fate of the elected Syriza government, in Brazil with the Workers’ Party government, in South Africa with the ANC, and in many other reformist parties over the decades (such as Allende in Chile in 1973 or the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1920s and 30s). Smucker discusses the OWS experience but not any of these. Nor does he examine any of the rich history of revolutions and counterrevolutions, which have been studied by anarchists, Marxists, and bourgeois historians. It is true that we cannot expect a revolution—or even a prerevolutionary period—in the near future. But the goal of a revolution can be used to guide the current struggle for reforms and how that is carried out. A study of the

history of previous attempts at revolution could provide lessons even broader than only looking at OWS and the other limited experiences which Smucker has personally gone through.

In fact, limiting ourselves just to struggles for reforms, **in the U.S. almost every major victory has been won by non-electoral means.** The rights of unions were won through mass strike waves. The destruction of legal Jim Crow and other gains for African-Americans were won through mass civil disobedience as well as urban rebellions (“riots”). The war in Vietnam was opposed through demonstrations, draft resistance, campus strikes, and a virtual mutiny in the armed forces. LGBT rights were fought for through the Stonewall rebellion and ACT-UP’s civil disobedience. The women’s movement was an integral part of these non-electoral struggles. The legal and electoral aspects of these movements were efforts by the establishment to respond to these popular struggles, to get them under control, and finally to kill them. The Democratic Party played a big part in that.

## The Hegemony of Gramsci

Smucker relies heavily on the concepts of Antonio Gramsci, such as “hegemony”, “articulation,” and others. Without being a Gramsci enthusiast, I do not criticize Smucker for being willing to learn from a Marxist theorist. (Although it seems a little odd to use an unusual word like “hegemony” in the title of a book addressed to a wide audience.) Gramsci advocated a revolution by the working class, in a broad alliance with all oppressed and exploited people, to overturn capitalism and the existing state. These are concepts with which I agree and which Smucker may not, or at least does not raise here. However, even the best Marxists should be read critically, given the disastrous results whenever Marxists have taken power.

For example, the concept of “hegemony,” as used by Gramsci, indicates that the capitalist class rules through dominating popular culture and ideology—and that the working class and oppressed need to reverse this, so that emancipatory culture and ideology becomes the “common sense” of the popular classes.

However, “hegemony” might also be interpreted with authoritarian implications, implying that a minority which thinks it knows the Truth should seek to dominate popular consciousness. In fact, Gramsci was a Leninist, an advocate of a centralized vanguard party. The party, in his conception, aimed to take power through a new state, presumably in the interests of the working class. In the factional conflicts within the Communist International and the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci took the side of Stalin (Chiaradia 2013).

“Hegemony” may also be interpreted as a reformist strategy. If we focus predominantly on the cultural and ideological power of the ruling class, this may lead to downplaying its economic power (the use of unemployment and insecurity to discipline the working class) and the armed power of its state. The police and military do not usually interfere directly in politics, but they are always in the background, to be used in a crisis (again: as in the destruction of the Occupy encampments). This can lead militants to emphasize political maneuvering and cultural enlightenment, and to ignore hard power, confrontation, and the nature of the state. In fact, after World War II, the Italian Communist Party, as well as later “Eurocommunist” parties, followed reformist strategies while claiming to be inspired by Gramsci.

None of this should prevent people from learning whatever they can from Gramsci’s work. (See Anderson 1977.) But they should view it critically.

## Hope for the Future

Jonathan Smucker expects continuing difficulties and crises in society to create openings for popular movements, in various ways and on various issues. “A left hegemonic project will become a realistic possibility in the decades ahead.” (255) “The signs are all around us that such a progressive populist alignment is coming into being.” (247) I think this perspective is likely. I also agree with Smucker that radicals need to prepare for this, to think about how to cope with the growing discontent, and to organize ourselves as part of organizing others. The self-organizing of radicals is part of the self-organizing of popular movements.

However, he ignores some of the dangers involved. Liberals, reformists, and those establishment allies Smucker wants to look for, will aim to keep the “populist” movements within respectable and limited bounds—that is, to keep them ineffective. Revolutionary anarchists and other libertarian socialists need to build a militant, radical, left wing of the movements (especially the labor movement with its potential strategic power). They need to oppose (to seek hegemony over) those who withdraw into self-satisfied isolation, but also to oppose those who are willing to accept the limitations of capitalism and its state.

In the front of this book, his anarchist publishers, the AK Press Collective, have a statement. Probably referring to his electoralism and similar aspects of his strategy, they write, “Smucker’s personal politics sometimes include strategies for social change that AK Press doesn’t advocate, but we think the ideas he presents will be useful to a range of strategic approaches...”

As did AK Press, I find this a useful and interesting book. It raises insightful criticisms of some anarchists and others. It proposes programmatic suggestions, some of which I think are valuable from a revolutionary view— and some of which I think are wrong (reformist) but worth thinking through as he presents them.

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