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On choosing to abstain from elections

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- Someone from the audience: ...How would you view the participation of some anti-authoritarians (and not only) in elections?

— Cornelius Castoriadis: I would say that instead of running in elections, you could have practiced basketball that Sunday.

~ Castoriadis' discussion with the audience at the political memorial of Agis Stinas (1989).¹

According to Alexander Hamilton, one of US' Founding Fathers, among the most important rights of the subject is that of voting at elections as a share in the sovereignty of the state.² This logic is the foundational basis of contemporary parliamentarism. And yet, for years we have been witnessing a decline in voter turnout around the world — with researches suggesting that voter turnout

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¹ www.aftoleksi.gr

² Harold C. Syrett (ed.): *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* 26 vols. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1961), 79.

in elections across the world has declined by over 10 percent since the 1960s.³

But if ballot-casting is so fundamental for our freedom, why would so many people choose to do something else than go to vote on election day? Especially since elections are the only process that, once in every four or five years, allows citizens to supposedly take part in the management of the State.

When confronted with this trend many point at laziness, boredom, and apathy as the main sources, and not a generalized dissatisfaction with the dominant system. But if someone is to consider the issue seriously, then it becomes clear that all of these reasons are deeply interrelated. There is no change in human DNA that has made the generations of the past half century more prone to laziness and boredom. Instead it can be argued that it is the prolonged functioning of parliamentarism that has infused large segments of the population with cynicism. It is, after all, a system where groups within a managerial class compete with each other for people's votes in order to take over the seats of authority. But once in power, their main task consists in ensuring their reelection and the continuation of business-as-usual.

It is this oligarchic nature of contemporary parliamentarism that has been alienating voters for years. As sociologists Davita Glasberg and Deric Shannon point out:

alienated individuals do care but feel estranged or disaffected from the system or somehow left out of the political process. For those who are politically alienated, voting does not address their interests or their needs and so participation has no meaning for them. They often view political leaders as unresponsive to their needs, pursuing instead the narrow interests of the elite.[...]

For some, the lack of community structures that encourage participation denies them the opportunity to participate in meaningful

³ University of Essex: 'Politicians must connect emotionally with issues to halt global voter apathy, new research shows' www.essex.ac.uk

*civic activities that can contribute to a belief in the efficacy of participation.*⁴

In its essence, the dominant system is a continuation of the old aristocracies. While claiming to derive from the democratic tradition of Ancient Athens, parliamentarism lacks the very basic institutions of the Athenian democracy: that of popular deliberation at public assemblies and sortition (choosing revocable delegates by lot). Instead, it's very logic stems from the traditions of oligarchic rule and aristocracy — electing the supposedly best individuals among us to form a ruling elite that concentrates all political power in its hands.

Thus, a managerial class is formed, with its own interests and priorities that are distinct from those of the great electoral mass. With the passage of time, the discrepancy between rulers and ruled becomes increasingly clearer, and it is getting harder to conceal this gap behind the liberal ideological veil of “political representation”. French writer and anarchist Octave Mirbeau captures this mismatch masterfully as early as 1902 in his essay *La Grève des Électeurs*, in the following way:

*Above all, remember that the man who solicits your suffrage is, by this very fact, a dishonest man, for in exchange for the situation and the fortune you propel him towards he promises you a bunch of marvelous things that he won't give you and that aren't not in his power to give you, anyway. The man you elevate represents neither your poverty nor your hopes nor anything else about you. He only represents his own passions and interests, which are the opposite of yours.*⁵

Election after election, people begin to experience a sense of déjà vu, with faces and narratives among the ruling elite being reshuffled, while the basic parameters of the system remain the

⁴ Davita Glasberg and Deric Shannon: *Political Sociology: Oppression, Resistance, and the State* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2011), p102.

⁵ Octave Mirbeau: *La Grève des Électeurs* (Paris, Temps Nouveaux), 1902.

same. Living conditions worsen not so much due to the political intentions of specific governments, but by the fluctuations of a market mechanism that has been made independent from the political sphere, and a capitalist class that does everything in its power to increase its wealth in the expense of the rest of us and of nature. And despite the promises made by populist parties, electorates haven't felt any substantial change, which further contributes to the rising cynicism. And there is a reason why we cannot expect change from within the dominant institutional framework; as philosopher Herbert Marcuse has suggested:

*Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear – that is, if they sustain alienation. And the spontaneous reproduction of superimposed needs by the individual does not establish autonomy; it only testifies to the efficacy of the controls.*⁶

The thing is that parliaments, by their very nature, are anti-democratic institutions. They align, instead, with the oligarchic and aristocratic traditions. They provide the means for an elite of few to fill parliamentary seats. Regardless of whether suffrage is universal or not, in the end it is a handful of people who get to call the shots. And this happens in plain sight, beneath a thin ideological veil that presents elected politicians as expressions of popular will, while in reality they represent their own interests. Because of that philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis insists that:

Parliamentary institutions, [...] whether called the “National Assembly,” the “U.S. Congress,” or the “Supreme Soviet of the USSR,” are by definition types of institutions that cannot be socialist. They are founded on a radical separation between the people, “consulted” from

⁶ Herbert Marcuse: *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2013), p10.

has barely any legitimacy as it is based on the electoral “consent” of less than one fourth of the country’s population.¹²

In any case, there is no electoral short-cut to social change. To continue insisting on electoralism is counterproductive and shows detachment from reality. The only path towards a truly democratic and ecological future is the one Castoriadis calls a “long and patient work of preparation”.¹³ This would imply steering away from parliamentary illusions, while focusing on the consistent, though at times slow, creation and maintenance of grassroots institutions and the continuous demand for greater popular participation in decision-making. Of course, the status quo and its supporters will resist such efforts, but this is so only because, as David Graeber suggests, there’s nothing that scares the rulers more than the prospect of democracy breaking out.¹⁴

¹² Ιωάννα-Μαρία Μαραβελίδη: ‘Τα εκλογικά αποτελέσματα με ενσωμάτωση της αποχής’ in *Aftoleksi* www.aftoleksi.gr

¹³ Harald Wolf: ‘A “long and patient work of preparation” in an age of catastrophe: Remarks on Castoriadis’ political legacy’ in *Aftoleksi* www.aftoleksi.gr

¹⁴ Marisa Holmes: ‘David Graeber’s Real Contribution to Occupy Wall Street Wasn’t a Phrase – It Was a Process’ in *Novaramedia* novaramedia.com

*time to time, and those who are supposed to “represent” them, but who are in fact uncontrollable and irremovable.*⁷

What the democratic tradition, from Kropotkin, through Castoriadis, to Bookchin, advances as main locus of decision-making are the institutions closest to the grassroots — namely that of the popular assembly and of the council of revocable delegates. In the place of the parliamentary state, Castoriadis proposes a network of general assemblies and councils as the only embodiment of power in society. As he suggests: “There are no other institutions that could manage, direct, or make binding decisions about people’s lives.”⁸

Through one such institutional framework the separation of society into rulers and ruled, law-makers and law-abiders is abolished. If the essence of parliamentarism is to foster one such separation, then that of direct democracy is the exact opposite — to conflate these roles and radically disseminate them, on equal basis, among the whole of a given population. As Nicolas Trifon suggests, this implies “establishing a society where everybody is at once law-maker and law-abider, where laws are revocable, and where laws are dictated by real interests, and not vice versa.”⁹

In this sense we shouldn’t have any illusions regarding the potentials of parliamentary electoralism. The last point of defense for representativity, often evoked by leftists and liberals alike, is voting for the lesser evil, so that our rights and freedoms are shielded from the forces of reaction. It was this logic that led German socialists and liberals to support President Hindenburg, from whom they expected to prevent the Nazis from taking power — a strategy that backfired gravely with Hindenburg’s cabinet handing power

⁷ Cornelius Castoriadis: *On the Content of Socialism: From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Idea of the Proletariat’s Autonomy* (1957) www.marxists.org

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bogdan Rusu: ‘Nicolas Trifon: A Franco-Romanian Aromanian Anarchist’ in *Contradictions* vol. 7, No. 2 (2023), p241.

to Hitler in the prewar period.¹⁰ Certain socialist tendencies in France rallied in support of the authoritarian de Gaulle to prevent a civil war and stop the rise of fascism in the country – with his presidency, however, the French capitalism was allowed to reaffirm its stability, with exploitation and repressions continuing, leading to the mass uprising of May 1968.¹¹

We see over and over again how the logic of voting for the lesser evil does not bear fruit, contributing instead to the further increase of disappointment and cynicism among society, which in turn fuels far-right tendencies.

As a result of the generalized disappointment from parliamentary electoralism and its repetitive failures, some have turned their efforts at municipal elections instead. Here again, several issues must be taken under consideration.

First, contemporary council institutions, within the framework of the Nation-State, have been greatly disempowered. They often are downgraded to the level of mere implementators of policies that have been decided by parliaments. In this sense, local councilors could, at best, act to soften the impact of such policies on the community, not to advance a new paradigm. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule, but in such cases, it was most probably the mobilization of mass and inclusive social movements that initiated any meaningful change on local level, with elected progressive councilors having only supplementary role.

Second, the municipal councils of today, in their vast majority, are a micrograph of parliaments, with councilors from different parties advancing capitalist interests and their own self-interest. There is no effective popular control over the functioning of these institutions. And for many demagogues municipal councils are a

¹⁰ Heinrich August Winkler: 'Choosing the Lesser Evil: The German Social Democrats and the Fall of the Weimar Republic.' in *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 2/3 (1990): pp.205–27.

¹¹ Edgar Hardcastle: *Socialists and General de Gaulle* (1958) www.marxists.org

stepping stone to a further career into the higher echelon of given party and into parliament.

With this said, it must be kept in mind that the municipal council, unlike the institution of the parliament, is part of the democratic tradition. What is needed is its detachment from the Capital-Nation-State complex, not its functioning within the dominant oligarchic parameters, so that it can be re-embedded into a participatory grassroots framework.

With the fall in trust in parliamentary institutions a potential emerges for advancing a truly democratic grassroots alternative to the status quo. An alternative that will allow municipalities to confederate with one another, rather than be subjugated to the domination of a central command (i.e. central government).

The growing disenchantment with the contemporary voting processes are, however, an uncomfortable fact for the ruling elite, and low voter turn-out is usually omitted from the final outcome, since the results which are presented to the public and on the basis of which governments are being formed, are solely based on those who have casted a ballot. Those who have chosen to abstain are simply added as a side note, somewhere in-between statistics.

If abstention rates are embedded in the final result, then we get to see that the “majorities” that get to form governments are actually often also minorities. In this way, outcomes will show the percentage each party gets not on the basis of all who have casted a ballot, but on the whole of the population (including all those who find it meaningless to vote). Thus, the oligarchic nature of the present system can further be underlined.

Let's take for example the Greek parliamentary elections of 2023. There the first party won with nearly 41% from those who casted a ballot. But when considering the record-high abstention rate, which at these elections was over 47%, then you get to see that the winner got only 21,4%. Thus, it becomes clear that even in terms of representative parliamentarism, the government formed