

Selecting a Master or Ousting a Tyrant

Radical reflections for the selection year

Various Authors

2004

Here in the heart of imperial North America, it's (s)election year, and whether we like it or not, public discourse over the next several months will be dominated by campaign shenanigans.

Finding the proper revolutionary response to this spectacle spawns the usual frustration and debate. While a few antiauthoritarians have joined the "Anybody but Bush" chorus rampant on the liberal-left, others have dusted off their quadrennial rants against the inherently corrupt capitalist system and its permanent war machine, claim to moral supremacy, and facade of representative democracy.

In this section, *Fifth Estate* collective members have contributed and compiled a variety of past and present commentaries on the electoral mirage. Your comments are welcome as letters in the next edition.

Please see letters pages for guidelines.

Time to Change Masters

From November 1930, *The Road to Freedom: A Periodical of Anarchist Thought, Work, and Literature*, from the Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

It matters little whether you vote or not. You will have lost nothing for you have nothing to lose; you will gain nothing because you have nothing to gain through the institution of politics.

He who consciously and deliberately refrains from voting merely asserts his aloofness from the political cesspool while he who expresses faith in the political machine gives tacit approval to the purpose of politics.

There are many reasons why intelligent men and women should refuse to vote. The sanctity of citizenship has long since been betrayed. Politics is a business pursued for the sole purpose of selfish gain. It is the propaganda end of government through which corporate interests controlling the government gain sanction for their crimes against the public good.

Anarchists do not vote because they oppose the essential principle of government. They do not condemn the individual politician because he is a crook—rather they condemn the system of society that offers him the temptation to rob his fellow-men of their liberties as well as the fruits of their toil. They oppose government because it is based upon physical force, because it protects the rich and impoverishes the poor, declares war and forces workmen to die in battles with which they have nothing to do.

Every vote cast by a workingman is another link in the chain that binds him to an industrial overlord. Freedom from government and the shackles of economic slavery can only come through mass solidarity of the workers on the bread and butter battle lines. When you cast your vote, you signify acquiescence to the political machine that throttles your liberties and robs your children of the natural right to happiness.

Riot One day, vote the next

by David Watson

From "Watching the Dogs Salivate: Remarks on the 1992 Elections," FE #341 Spring 1993; reprinted in *Against the Megamachine: Essays on Empire and its Enemies* (Autonomedia).

Despite the palpable fraud, reasoned anarchist arguments against voting never seemed so brittle or flatly rationalistic—something akin to shouting in a vacuum. The declaration that "we" should abstain suggested a coherence in mass society that massification itself had undermined. One could, after all, riot one day and vote the next, but such acts do not in themselves necessarily constitute what radicals have trained ourselves to think they mean, or what dogma might say they mean.

I was sympathetic to those who voted for the challenger simply because they hated the incumbent's guts. What was one more humiliation if you wouldn't have to hear that nasal-rich boy whine of a monster you had grown to abhor with a bitter puissance, and you could see him repudiated rather than vindicated by his own system of prestige?

In Baghdad, people danced in the streets when Bush's defeat was announced. One could hardly blame them; it might have been worth voting just to send them a ray of sunshine and a drop of revenge. Indeed, it was hard to resist the temptation to ruin Bush's day; it was lovely to hear how depressed he became after his defeat ...

In June 1854, Thoreau asked his journal, "Who can be serene in a country where both rulers and ruled are without principle? The remembrance of the baseness of politicians spoils my walks. My thoughts are murder to the State; I endeavor in vain to observe nature; my thoughts involuntarily go plotting against the State. I trust all just men will conspire."

Some things have changed little since Thoreau's day. Endeavoring in vain to observe nature, my mind involuntarily goes to plotting. Plot against the State; plot against the state of affairs. I hope all just women and men will conspire.

Prolecat

America's refusal to vote may well have more in common with a boycott, a great, unorganized wildcat strike, than with the accepted notion of laziness and disinterest. In the middle stands the majority, the great undecided. This is your neighbor who put a flag on her car when America invaded Afghanistan, but took it off before the invasion of Iraq.

This person may even show up at a protest, but insists on dragging her flag back out of the closet for the occasion, lest she offend a vocal co-worker who remains staunchly pro-war. She has the vague sense that something is wrong, but can't quite shake the old habits, can't look the great taboo in the face and say, "That flag does not represent me." But she rarely votes, either.

This person is undecided, uncommitted, but she is hardly apathetic. She may have mixed emotions, but she is anything but unemotional. She cries for the victims, both in New York and in Baghdad. And, for the media to say otherwise because she refuses to vote is a slap in the face, and a gross, self-serving misrepresentation.

In September 2004, the Republican Party will be holding their convention in New York City. The protests outside are sure to be massive and volatile. Will the nation be treated to a repeat of Chicago in 1968? Or, will it be even more violent, as the patriotic commemorators of September 11 spill into the streets to join the police in doing battle with the protesters?

No one knows for sure. There are only three things that may be predicted with confidence: there will be a huge number of people in the street protesting, the actual number will be a topic of much discussion and debate, and the press will portray the American populace as lazy and out-of-touch.

Someone is surely lazy and out-of-touch, but I suspect it is not my neighbor.

Voting: An immodest Appeal

William Blank

Let us experience the changing of the capital guard who guards capital. Let us remind ourselves and our enemies that the lesser of two evils was and is the evil of two lesser, that, sure, if voting really changed anything they'd make it illegal, that voting is a game and we lose, and that slogans are made to be broken.

Imagine a new target of derision and disaffection for 2004 and beyond, that we, as anarchists or anti-authoritarians, can lead the charge(s) against a newly elected (promoted) boss and the newly-minted millionaire, who will unintentionally reassert the need for a new system, not new glasses for the same old vision of Domination and Control, the real D.C., in Washington.

Yes, let us urge an alternative error, let us recall the replacement part with another faulty replacement, a new neo-conservative mistake, anybody but the worst of the worst, this rogues' gallery of the empire's neo-fascists, these fryer-ready chickenhawks, these state engineers for WW III (or WW IV, depending on how one tabulates such insanity).

Let us temporarily suspend conscientious non-voting as the Spanish CNT unexpectedly suspended its abstain-stance in 1936; let us vote on our way to the next revolutionary gathering, as if we are only paying for one month's rent, a pay toll, a poll tax(!), as if voting this time could merely cover the cost of a bullet proof vest or gas mask, for some purely defensive necessity in time of war, while we buy a moment to reload and reorganize, and not just react.

If we can choose our friends, why not choose our enemies, at least this time around?

G W Bush, the Sequel to the Sequel, would no longer have to pretend any faked adherence to a system of bounced checks and imbalances. Like any second-term president, Bush as a not-quite-lame-enough lame duck would no longer have to con his constituency for votes. Nihilists and immovable anarchists may collectively shrug at a Bush second term as "finishing the job" of catastrophe, but this hardly inspires non-voting.

So let us vote: vote for the paradox, for the temporary execution, and remember it is only an exercise for moving feet, a small step in the marathon run for radical change.

Final Disclaimer: this appeal does not intend to suggest elections in any way as the final or preferred activity behind closed curtains.

Sunfrog

While electoral participation might be the least empowering form of political activity, some activists see it as an absolute necessity this coming November. Since the coup of 2000, left-liberals have been clamoring for an anti-Bush united front in 2004.

Like the so-called progressives, a few anarchists actually got excited about the liberal candidacies of Kucinich, Sharpton, and Dean. Now it looks like we're stuck with the lesser evil of John Kerry in November. Even the ultra-right ideology and totalitarian tendencies of the Bush administration cannot justify how quickly Kerry's candidacy killed the grassroots, anti-war revival among activist Democrats.

Fostering a genuine, popular social and political revolution in America won't be accomplished by voting, but anti-voting ideology isn't instigating deep change either. Rather, fostering a revolutionary mood in America requires creative and sustainable ways to tap into the popular sentiment expressed last year against war, empire, and Bush.

While a Bush defeat would never change the fundamental political reality of living under crisis capitalism in a unipolar world, the fundamental political spectacle as perceived by the majority of the world's citizens would. Certainly, if Bush is installed again, many across the globe might start to think we really do prefer permanent warfare to our own welfare. Despite our desires, revolution in North America is unlikely before November.

Participating in compromise and coalitions is rarely the first choice for individuals of principle. Even some pacifists feel killing is acceptable in self-defense; some anarchists feel the same logic applies to voting.

As a philosophy, anarchism holds personal participation in political decisions at the highest level; while some anarchists don't believe in politics per se, others instead seek social arrangements where we decide for ourselves rather than blindly delegating that right to others, most especially states and corporations.

The religiosity of "anarchists don't vote" is in one sense a lie. Anarchists vote everyday by the small and large gestures we use to express the vigor of our opposition to authoritarian rule. Rather than waste a single word lambasting any friend or comrade who chooses to vote in this pivotal and perhaps already fixed election, let's create a reality of resistance larger than words that does more than voting to express our opposition to the empire and our desire for a new world.

Walker Lane

I haven't voted for a president since the 1968 quadrennial fraud where one war criminal, Hubert Humphrey, lost to Richard Nixon, who would become one. I plunked my ballot down for Black Panther leader, Eldridge Cleaver, on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket. I suspect that was the last time I will enter a voting booth.

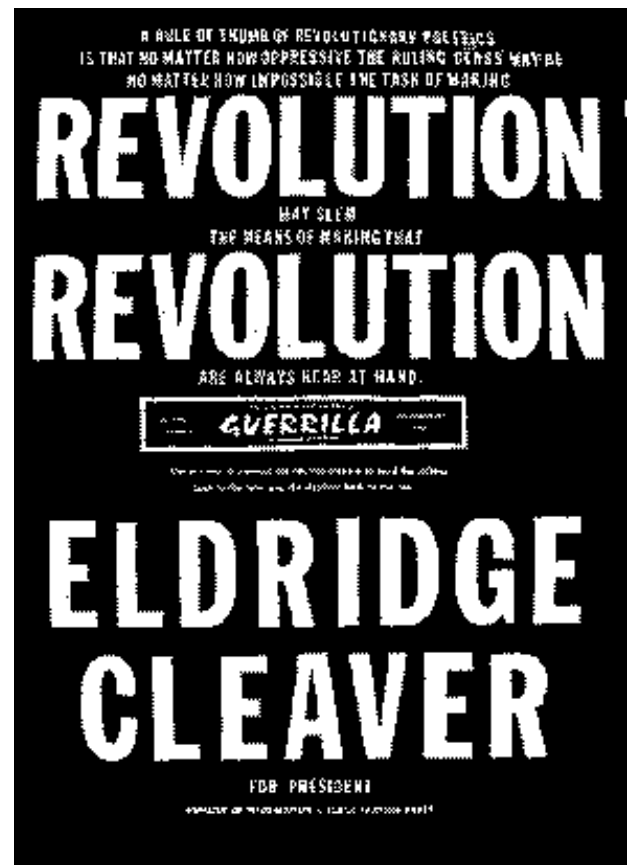
Humphrey had disgraced himself, stating infamously, "Vietnam is our finest hour," even though the extent of the imperial slaughter had already been widely exposed. Also, this once famous liberal was nominated beneath the truncheons of the Chicago cops at the uproarious 1968 Democratic Party convention.

The Democratic Vice-President wasn't a candidate who could be made more palatable by invoking the phrase, "the lesser of the two evils," when compared to the dreadful Nixon. In fact, Humphrey was perceived by many of us as being the greater evil, given the Johnson administration's merciless prosecution of its war against Vietnam, and its failure to stop attacks on black leaders and communities.

Did we guess wrong? Nothing could have been worse than Nixon's mad escalation of the war which finally left 3.5 million Vietnamese dead as well as 58,000 of the invaders. Humphrey lost by a mere one half of a percentage point and those abstainers, including me, could have conceivably made a difference in the election's outcome. This, of course, assumes Humphrey would have done anything differently.

In the previous election, some radicals backed Johnson over the arch conservative Barry Goldwater, fearing that he represented the extreme anti-communist wing of the Republican Party and, if elected, would involve the US in a large scale ground war in Southeast Asia. It was the liberal Democrat, as it turned out, who did just that. Electoral history is replete with other such examples of how the lesser of two evil voting produced the very evil most feared.

Electoral activity as it relates to somewhat authentic reform doesn't have much of a track record either. One has only to recall the election triumphs of the left in 1936 Spain and 1970 Chile to be a bit apprehensive



1968: the first and last time the *Fifth Estate* endorsed a presidential candidate, Eldridge Cleaver, Minister of Information, the Black Panther Party. The small text on

this centerfold poster reads: "A rule of thumb of revolutionary politics is that no matter how oppressive the ruling class may be, no matter how impossible the task of making revolution may seem, the means of making that revolution are always near at hand. 'Our purpose in entering the political arena is to send the jackass back to the farm and the elephant back to the zoo.'" 4

zoo."

about what such “victories” achieve. When the will of the people was expressed through the official means provided by the state apparatus, it spurred a fascist revolt followed by decades of repressive dictatorship. It gives even greater weight to the old anarchist saying, “If voting could change anything, it would be illegal.”

The question of voting by those opposed to the state and capital arises again as we confront the damage to people and the planet caused by the vile Bush regime in just over three years. However, many of those who should know better have bought into the anti-Bush rhetoric to the extent of accepting the prevailing left/liberal mythology that the 1990s under the Clinton/Gore administrations was some sort of Golden Age with a booming economy and peace.

But this means ignoring NAFTA, de-industrialization and job loss; “welfare reform” (a polite phrase for kicking the poor ‘off the rolls), more cops, one environmental sell-out after the next, and, if we want to keep score of dead Iraqis (and we should), our great liberal icons are responsible for hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths through the enforcement of economic sanctions and thousands of bombing raids on that country. Bush’s toll makes him a piker compared to the mountain of corpses Clinton produced.

There’s no disagreement that Bush and his corporate and right-wing sponsors have turned the system entirely into a racket for the rich (rather than the crumbs it previously provided). The only positive aspect of this is that it neatly illuminates the true function of government—an apparatus to loot the populace and protect society’s rulers.

But Bush policies are so egregiously shortsighted that even the financial sector of the U.S. elite class worry that the greed and messianic drive of the dominant right-wing ideology threaten the long term interests of capital itself. When the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warns that Bushonomics endanger the entire world economic system, it is a clear signal that big capital is worried about policies that maximize short term profit over long term financial stability.

That government is based on organized force and looting is nothing new. The state arose thousands of years ago as an institution to protect wealth and hierarchy and little has changed subsequently. The fact that a few governments in the last 300 years have given a thought to the needs of the ruled is a late development and one which is currently being reversed, particularly in this country. So-called democratic governments are but a footnote in the repressive history of the political state.

BushCo shovels the swag into the maw of the greedy corporations in an unprecedented manner because the opposition is so symbolic. Imperial Rome knew that it needed to provide bread and circuses for the masses, so they would ignore the conditions of their subjugation. Now, Bush offers only television circuses in the form of terror alerts and wars against the empire’s great enemies no matter what pipsqueaks they really are, plus the usual fare of media titillation.

There are no grand movements of opposition even as the country’s infrastructure deteriorates, schools close, prices rise and more and more jobs move to areas in which the wage structures are what the capitalists hope will soon be the world norm.

This will not be altered by the election of what has traditionally been the other half of the ruling political con game. George W. Bush and John Kerry, the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate at this writing, are fellow members of the secretive, upper class, good old boy, Yale-based Skull and Bones society, and it is unclear whether the latter’s election would signal an abrupt change in the disastrous Republican policies, or just a change of faces.

Gwendolyn Mink, author of *Welfare’s End*, and currently writing a book on the Democratic Party, said, “The Kerry campaign seems to be focused on demonstrating the candidate’s martial virtue to win over the warrior electorate. Combined with his unapologetic defense of his vote giving Bush carte blanche to invade Iraq, the masculinist Kerry campaign raises disturbing questions about just how much he would change current foreign and military policy.”

It would be an excellent sign if the American people at least showed enough collective fortitude and plain common sense to handily reject someone who is destroying their standard of living, lied about the reasons for war, and is giving the store away to the rich. But screw voting as a means of stopping Bush. The real question is, “Why aren’t

there hundreds of thousands out in the streets banging pots and pans demanding social and economic justice such as we've seen in South American countries?" The answer is stuff for another article, but ultimately it is the most important question we face.

Those who oppose the state on principle but are willing to abandon the concept based on a perceived need to defeat Bush, should probably just go ahead. Particularly if they can get past the sequential humiliation of wage work, followed by voting on the day designated for choosing your ruler.

However, I wonder what those people in the anarchist milieu think they will accomplish by casting an isolated ballot that matters little in the aggregate total. There certainly aren't enough of us to constitute an anti-authoritarian bloc of voters, and I doubt if we'll see an Anarchists for Kerry committee being established to urge disaffected radicals to register and vote.

So, at best, voting is an empty gesture born of an understandable frustration of being unable to accomplish our goals through traditional anarchist direct action and community building, but at worst, rather pathetic—a sacrifice of principle for nothing in return.

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