

Elections have consequences

but only direct action will get you satisfaction

Paul Walker (Peter Werbe)

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“If voting could change anything, it would be illegal.”

—Anarchist anti-electoral slogan

It's difficult to imagine that there isn't at least some joy, even among the most ardent electoral abstentionists, about the losses Donald Trump and the Republicans suffered in the November mid-term elections. The party and the president's final call to continue their hard right agenda based on a relentless campaign of fear and hatred of immigrants was so fascistic that one could easily substitute Jew for those attempting to enter the country at the southern border.

That elections have consequences seems undeniable. Historical examples abound with the early 1930s being a signal era which saw Adolph Hitler's Nazi party gain dominance in Germany and the victory of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the U.S. Their electoral successes of profoundly changed the history of their country and of the world.

However, each marked a different mode of meeting a crisis in capital and the nature of political rule. One utilized repression, the other reform. As one can note from history, the latter performed better than the former in protecting capitalism and the state.

Slogans, like the one above, are designed for use on picket signs and can't be nuanced or give complex explanations of what underlies its words. If they could be, this catchy phrase would be rendered more like, “If voting could change the entire system of capitalism and the rule of the political state, the rulers wouldn't risk putting such a proposal up for a vote.” Not very punchy, but it gets more to the core of what's at issue when discussing anarchist voting.

Anarchists have traditionally stayed away from political activity, correctly viewing the arena of parties and elections as a dead end that sucks revolutionary movements into the system they are trying to abolish. This has an ironic twist since the first person to declare himself an anarchist was Pierre Joseph Proudhon, who became a member of the French Parliament after the European revolutions of 1848.

Ironic since it was that year that launched an almost century long period of heroic but failed revolutions defeated by the forces of first reaction and finally Stalinism, but also the corrosive nature of reformism to revolutionary thrusts.

Capital and its bulwark, the state, have plenty of latitude in which to provide inclusion of excluded groups and, when pushed, a somewhat more equitable distribution of wealth if enough political commotion is created. What it will never do is allow challenges to its existence.

When those occur, as in the wide-spread European 1848 revolutions, the 1871 Paris Commune, or the Spanish Revolution in the late 1930s, brute force, the armed might of the state or fascism is employed to assure capitalism's continuance.

Within the context of acceptance of established parameters, often alterations are allowed through popular elections although this occurs only in a few countries and in different periods. State administration throughout history has overwhelmingly been autocratic or dictatorial.

In nation states that feature formal democratic rule, reforms become possible as pressure from below suggests that this is the best course to head off revolutionary confrontations and the smooth operation of the system. Whether anarchists vote or not, elections often have extraordinary consequences.

Political tendencies such as liberalism and social democracy are often motivated by a genuine desire to alleviate the worst abuses of capitalism, hence, programs such as social legislation, the extension of rights, minimal protection of the environment, and the like are enacted.

However, even those political reform tendencies with seemingly the best of intentions either become thoroughly corrupt like the Workers Party of Brazil. Or the Democratic Party in the U.S. while advocating reforms at home, presides over the murderous American empire abroad as enthusiastically as the Republicans.

Reforms and their advocacy create the illusion that if not anything is possible, at least something is. In practical terms, while reforms often serve to make life better for capital's subjects, they have the function of affirming and extending the system.

When you are a prisoner, a nice guard is better than a brutal one, and when overwhelmed by the power of your captor, hoping for the best one seems a logical course. But, at least a dream of escape—of freedom—should be present.

At this point, anarchism looks only like a dream, but one that sustains us in our hopes, all of which lay outside of what exists now

Voting seems beside the point. Casting a ballot on the prescribed day is the most passive of all political acts, soon to be made even more so as computer screen voting will probably soon be a reality. It's not clear that clicking a check box invalidates the anarchist electoral critique, but probably reduces the integrity of it. Most people don't vote as it is. During the 2018 Michigan primary election, there was a 28 percent turnout, with all of the political tumult, it was hoped that 50 percent would vote in the mid-term election.

How we exercise our activity is where the real question of expenditure of radical energy comes into question. On the macro level, one person doing or not doing anything doesn't count for much except in unique or exceptional circumstances. If one person does or doesn't vote, or come to an anti-fascist rally, or even the revolution, it doesn't mean much in the totality. However, when the relationship of the single unit to the aggregate is socially driven, then each is part of a coalescing force and is elevated in importance. Campaigning for an electoral candidate seems like an utter waste of radical effort and places the practitioner of affirming not only the politician who is part of the reigning system of domination, but often winds up with the opposite of what was hoped for. Case in point: Lyndon Johnson, the Democrat, was elected president in 1964 in great part because voters feared the other candidate would start a land war in Southeast Asia. How did that work out?

However, campaigning on issues which raise the nature of the system—Black Lives Matter, the state repressive mechanism; pipeline battles, the environment and Native land; reproductive and LGBTQ—rights, patriarchy—allows one to keep the integrity of the anarchist critique of the state, but probably has the unintended consequence of more people voting for liberal candidates.

Sorry, but that's what usually happens. Energized by engagement in political struggles, most people are going to turn towards voting for politicians most sympathetic to what they are fighting for. We can't control that other than to urge people we are campaigning with to see what works and what doesn't.

Most of us realize that, as the old slogan goes, only direct action will get you satisfaction. Although, there may be great satisfaction in seeing the White Christian Nationalist Party suffer a partial defeat, the system which fields murderous cops, destroys the environment, and prepares for the next Cold War remains intact.

According to most polls, the majority of Americans support a social democratic set of policies, but even those reforms face great impediments because of gerrymandering, voter suppression, and felon exclusion to assure racialized capitalism doesn't face democratic displacement.

However, at this point, there are no impediments to organizing outside of and against the system. The anarchist tradition has the critique and the vision to pose what is necessary for a new world.

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