

The Mystification of Voting

An Anarchist Critique

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2019

Since the 19th century, anarchists have made opposition to representative democracy and electoral politics central to our critique of the state and all forms of hierarchy. As radicals who envision a world without government, we don't want to lend legitimacy to the system of politicians and parties. The theme of this *Fifth Estate* issue is Anything Can Happen. This is not an empty slogan!

The Surrealists, the Situationists, and other artistic and political movements have taught us the critical importance of fighting the ways that powerful hierarchical institutions not only physically repress us with cops and soldiers, but narrow the horizons of what we believe is possible, of our ability to envision different worlds outside the logics of the state, capitalism, and social hierarchies.

This is why the 1968 Situationist slogan "All Power to the Imagination" continues to have so much resonance.

In the 21st century information economy, the limits imposed on our imaginations are more comprehensive and subtle than one could have imagined in previous eras. For example, censorship need not take the crude form of banning a book, a movie, or a speaker. Rather, the corporate bottlenecks through which our infinitely expanded seas of information and communication flow can adjust the algorithms that determine what we see and in what context.

Genuinely subversive ideas simply won't appear in your feed, or won't surface when you search Google or YouTube. Unlike the old model of censorship, which provided a basis around which resistance could catalyze, the new soft censorship happens mostly without anyone knowing, via private rather than state mechanisms (though at times in coordination with the FBI and such agencies), and coexists with the illusion that we have the freedom to consume whatever media and ideas we choose.

In this context, it is more imperative than ever that we struggle not just against the batons of the police, the tanks of the National Guard, and the drones of the Trump (or Obama) administrations, but also against the limits imposed on our ability to dream of a world that doesn't rest on our domination by a revolving door of Democrats and Republicans.

As a small but inspired minority of radicals with the courage and foresight to recognize that politicians are the cause, not the solution to our problems, anarchists have a critical role to play—freeing the imagination from the shackles of electoral thinking.

The impact we can have in this role infinitely exceeds whatever puny effect we could exert on the electoral process, even if we gave up our principles (and our sense of reality) and voted as a bloc.

Consider: how many anarchists are there in the United States? Perhaps a few thousand dedicated anarchist militants, and perhaps several tens of thousands of fellow travelers inspired by our ideas, mostly concentrated in cities and regions that tend to vote Democratic.

Even if every single one of us abandoned our anarchist convictions and voted—indeed, even if we all decided to move to a single district to maximize our electoral power—the impact we could have on national or even state/

local elections would be puny. Anarchist electoralism is the worst kind of defeatism, a pathetic embrace of our own irrelevance.

By contrast, anarchists believe that our true power is qualitative, not quantitative. That is, we can make an impact through the incisiveness of our critiques, the vitality of our ideas, the creativity of our direct action tactics, and the force of our determination to change the world—not through reducing ourselves to indistinguishable units of exchange and competing mathematically to become part of a majority.

It may be democratic to believe that the majority should rule, and that the belief held by the largest number must be legitimate—but anyone who believes that need look no further than the 2016 presidential election to see what side that puts them on.

Where anarchists differ from all political aspirants to power is in opposing rule itself—whether by majorities or minorities. Instead, we stand for the idea that all of us are entitled to control our own lives and make the decisions that affect us without representatives.

How then, the skeptic asks, does this look in practice? Sounds fine as a theory, but we live in Trump's America today, and we should respond to the reality we actually live in.

The most powerful way we can respond to any of the issues of oppression and exploitation that plague us is through direct action. Whether we're fighting against war, environmental destruction, deportations, or racist policing, we can act directly to shift the power balance away from these forces and institutions and back into our own hands.

In some cases, it may mean withdrawal—from social media, corporations, landlords—and self-organization, forming autonomous institutions to meet our needs for communication, information, housing, and other areas of our lives.

In other cases, it may require disruption and attack: using hacking, doxxing, sabotage, protest, and numerous other forms of resistance to shut down the institutions that are making our lives and others' unlivable. No matter what problem we're trying to solve, voting is one of the least direct, least reliable, and least effective methods of making actual lasting change.

So, what might replace parties and elections? While anarchists don't propose a single blueprint or platform—we're not trying to recruit for our party, but tear down the barriers that keep all of us from deciding for ourselves—we do have a lot of models and ideas. Some prefer a council system akin to what is happening in autonomous Rojava, Syria, with decision-making organized into face to face meetings in neighborhoods, workplaces, and self-defined groups, with authority federated, starting from the most local level possible.

Others like consensus processes in popular assemblies such as in the Occupy model. Some prefer a more syndicalist vision, where self-organized workplaces coordinate production and distribution across industries. Still others prioritize the informal ways through which we make most decisions and resolve most conflicts every day as the best way to stave off hierarchy.

The Paris Commune in 1871 enacted rotating bodies staffed by short-term representatives organized to prevent power from ever concentrating or specializing. The Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico formed caracoles reflecting the local collective core of decision-making that spiraled outward into coordination across communities and regions.

These and countless other examples from across history and cultures reflect the incredible diversity of ways we can organize our lives without recourse to politicians, voting, or hierarchy.

Most of these models have two features in common: first, they emerged in moments of crisis (the Syrian Civil War, the imposition of NAFTA in Mexico, mass protests or uprisings); and second, they drew on the pre-existing networks, tactics, and cultures of the people who experimented with them. It's unquestionable that we are in a period of crisis in the United States.

Political differences have mutated into extreme polarization, a remarkably wide swath of the population sees the current regime in power as illegitimate, and the solutions put forward by traditional power structures—the Democratic Party, the intelligence and policing structures—are laughable.

The most important thing that we can do as anarchists and other people of conscience in this political moment is to explore the networks, tactics, and cultures we can draw on to propose alternative solutions for resolving our problems outside of the electoral system.

One of the first steps we can take is to demystify voting. Let's show it for what it really is: a meaningless ritual cloaked in the symbolism of participation and civic responsibility; a smokescreen to hide how power really operates; an expression of our powerlessness and our inability to live our lives on our own terms.

We will never defeat Trump and all he stands for by replacing him. It will only happen by making him and all of his would-be successors irrelevant, by reclaiming the power representative democracy steals from us, using it to solve our problems directly and organizing our lives and communities on our own terms.

Clara is a participant in Crimethlnc: s Ex-Worker Podcast collective, and is not registered to vote in any municipality in the U.S. crimethinc.com/podcast

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Fifth Estate #402, Winter 2019

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