

The Privatization of the Welfare State

How NGOs Aid the State

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2019

If you or your loved ones don't have citizenship, are Native American, aren't white, aren't Christian, are women, queer, or trans, live near environmental sacrifice zones, depend on the natural environment for your health or subsistence, work a non-white-collar job, or participate in a radical movement, you are at risk under the Trump presidency. Fighting back against the government is a question of self-defense.

However, while many people have good reasons for hating Trump, there are some who have more elitist aims, namely, those who are fighting for their profits, or for institutional power such as the Democratic Party, Silicon Valley, and the mass media.

Historically, the term Left was first applied to the populist, anti-monarchist bourgeois delegates who sat on the left side of the chamber in the Constituent Assembly during the French Revolution. While the Right typically suppresses movements for freedom and well-being, the Left has a long history of manipulating and betraying them.

In response, the term "extra-parliamentary Left" was created to designate a space free of the pernicious control of political parties, where people work towards progressive goals using civil disobedience, direct action, or prefigurative politics.

However, the designation runs into immediate problems when applied to US politics. There has never been an important left-wing political party in this country. The American left has always been extra-parliamentary.

In the neoliberal age, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), represent the privatization of the welfare state. Individual NGOs can be more leftist than the Democratic Party, but the vast majority of their funding comes from the government, political action committees tied to one of the two major political parties, corporate foundations like those run by Microsoft and Ford, and wealthy donors. The causes that get funded depend largely on what the media decide to cover.

In the final analysis, NGOs represent the interests of the owners and rulers of society. For all the people who work in the world of environmental protection, women's and immigrant rights, and other important issues, this might seem like an exaggeration, unless they consider that NGOs take on the tasks of social integration and environmental damage control that every other moderately wealthy country in the world deals with through government bureaucracies. The very existence of NGOs allows the US government to be more conservative. During the recent uprisings of the last few years against police shootings beginning with that of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. in 2014 and spreading across the country, we see how the institutional side of the movement (from NGO-trained activists to self-appointed community leaders with ties to the Democratic Party) lines up alongside the forces of law and order, using a variety of tactics, from guilting to manipulation to outright snitching, in order to control the fight back tactics.

How independent are the people who take to the streets? Those from a lower economic class are especially vulnerable to the extreme marginalization and criminalization that the media and police, working together, can direct against them.

In the case of Ferguson and Oakland, black and brown people fighting back against the police were often silenced by the media invention of “outsider white anarchists” supposedly responsible for the mayhem. Subsequently, it became that much harder to organize support for the hundreds of arrestees. Moving up the social ladder, people who spend their college years in social movements often have their best chance at finding a job after graduation in a non-profit.

Their experience in the streets, modulated by the elitist and essentializing political culture of the universities, is just part of the process that trains them to divide society into easily managed demographic categories arranged on a scale of victimhood. In their circles, they are unlikely to ever encounter the people who contradict their belief that every demographic category possesses a separate and homogeneous set of interests and beliefs. Casting themselves as allies, they actually create the discourses they imagine themselves to be humbly listening to.

In the end, the Democratic Party does not need to control the extra-parliamentary Left, nor is it able to. With the support of the media and elements of the economic elite, the movement will grow, it will challenge government policy, and it will make Trump’s unpopularity resounding.

But mass media and social media platforms favor a discursive environment in which the only beliefs and demands of this movement that become widely known are those that boil down to a simple opposition to the current president and his policies.

If criticisms that transcend a single political administration are expressed—for example, the now widely cited figure that Obama broke all previous deportation records—they will simply help the Democrats locate the pulse of the movement and craft the charismatic program that will help them break out of their political crisis.

At election time, NGOs with no direct ties to the Democratic Party shift their resources to get out the vote, capitalizing on the momentum created by years of protest, civil disobedience, and direct action.

People will feel they can actually change things, and the democratic system will offer them the possibility of an easy victory. At no point do the Democrats need to become owners of this extra-governmental space. They don’t even need many people to believe in them, particularly, they just need to bump up voter turnout a few percentage points.

To make sure the maneuver pays off, they have to be able to marginalize anyone who expresses a critique of government as a whole. If 2016 is any indication, many people without any connection to the Democratic Party will do this for them, accusing anyone who doesn’t vote of being racist.

Democracy is the ideal form of government for a society such as ours. democracy is perfectly capable of managing genocide, slavery, economic empires, border regimes, murderous police, and a prison-industrial complex. It is proving to be an ideal instrument for Trump.

The Left and the Right are both governmental forces. They have no place within a truly anti-authoritarian movement that believes in the self-organization of society rather than the conquest of central power.

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