

On Social Democracy and Elections

2016, Spring / Summer

It's that time again, when after four (or eight) years, the presidential election becomes "the most important of our time." The clowns might be different, but the circus remains the same: filling vacancies on the Supreme Court, a rollback of abortion rights, foreign wars and targeted assassinations, the growing prison population, the expansion of the surveillance state... The campaigns of Trump and Sanders will surely be remembered as footnotes; the former is so buffoonish that even other Republicans can't help making fun of him, while the latter, a Socialist Jew, is obviously unelectable to the Executive Branch. Sure to be forgotten as well (at least until the next time) is the excitement of a certain group of self-described anarchists who, every so often, throw aside what might generously be characterized as a half-hearted adherence to anarchist principles, and proudly embrace and exercise their rights as American citizens. To vote. Over the years, plenty of these part-time anarchists have chosen to engage in electoralism, but they have usually done so privately, not daring to try to convince anyone that such engagement furthers any anarchist vision or project.

It was bad enough that there was a Hope Bloc to greet Obama's 2009 inauguration; this time around we have to stomach the spectacle of anarchists being shills for a Social Democrat. Surprisingly — or not! — pro-Sanders anarchists have something of an actual history to draw on. Murray Bookchin (when he was still pretending to be an anarchist) was a Sanders booster from the days when the current senator was the mayor of Burlington, Vermont; Sanders' tenure as an elected official may have been part of a real-world experience that contributed to Bookchin's municipal, and state-level pro-Green Party electoralist deviation.

A quick reminder: when anarchists use the term *direct action*, we mean any activity undertaken individually and/or collectively outside/against/without the use of elected or self-appointed representatives, especially those in government. Like

all principles are supposed to be, the anarchist promotion of direct action is non-negotiable. One of the contributing factors to the definitive dissolution of the First International was a split over the electoralist strategy of Socialists; anarchists embraced direct action as an explicit rejection of legal politics. It doesn't necessarily mean breaking shit (although that can be part of it), but it doesn't mean volunteering to get arrested, and it certainly doesn't *ever* mean petitioning politicians to change policies or laws.

From the 1870s, most anarchists have not considered legality and parliamentarism to be worthwhile strategic or tactical principles; when Socialists — who do — set up their Second International in 1889, they almost automatically excluded and/or ejected anarchists from it. Social Democracy, the ideology originating in the Second International, has different wings, from the electoral-fetishist, right-wing, non-Marxists all the way to the left-wing, insurrectionary, Marxist state capitalists (who eventually rejected the gradualism embodied in the Second and set up a Third International in 1919) more commonly known as Leninists. It's important to recall that all Leninists (and their various sectarian subgroups who worship Trotsky, Mao, Che, Ho, Stalin, ad nauseam) have showed themselves to be among the most implacable enemies of authentically radical social change. For the last 100 years, from Mexico to Russia, from Germany to Spain, from Vietnam to Hungary and Cuba, social democrats have proudly presided over the slaughter of anarchists and other radicals who have promoted the non-hierarchical self-organization — aka, direct action — of working class and poor people.

There's no reason to think that Bernie Sanders would be any different.

A presidential election year could be a time to point out and decry the many deliberate inadequacies of what constitutes American-style democracy: the near-total focus on religious issues; self-appointed Super Delegates; the pro-slavery origins of the Electoral College; the continual erosion of the provisions in the Voting Rights Act; the inordinate focus on Swing States; the Citizens United decision; to say nothing of the absurdity of having a two-party system that refuses proportional representation... Instead, pro-Sanders anarchists acquiesce to the junior high school level, lowest common denominator, internally contradictory, mythology of one-person-one-vote majority rule, and the average citizen's (alleged) full participation in political decision making. That'll show the state!

Regular readers of this journal may find the observation unduly trite, but it bears repeating that most of what's wrong with American anarchists, especially the activist subcategory, is that a sizable segment remains committed to some form of Leftism. From being immersed in projects championing some vague notion of "Social Justice" to acting as unpaid social workers, too many American anarchists continue to wallow in the strategic mire of defacto social democracy, constantly working to ameliorate the worst aspects of neoliberal post-industrial capitalism.

This was seen most clearly in the various Occupy camps around the country; horizontally organized charities are still charities; eviction/foreclosure defense is predicated on the idea of private property; representation (with or without the famous mandated delegates) remains unchallenged. It's not that projects that provide food and shelter are useless or unhelpful; plenty of people otherwise unable to squeeze out a basic level of survival at the bottom of the capitalist pyramid certainly appreciate the help. But to pretend that these activities are the seeds of the new inside the shell of the old is a delusion. Like voting. Most of the organizational structures and decision-making processes in such projects tend to mirror the worst aspects of virtually all varieties of the Left, like paternalism, bureaucratism, and institutionalized authoritarianism.

Electoralism, as an integral aspect of good citizenship, can't be separated from this. Perhaps there's some alluring residue of the patriotism left over from those junior high school civics classes, some form of loyalty to the whole "right of petition for the redress of grievances" thing. For whatever reason(s), too many anarchists continue to harbor illusions about the responsiveness of the duly elected legal representatives of the citizens of the United States; that's why they still organize and participate in demand-based protest, justified by rights-based discourse. Shamefully, too many anarchists can't seem to resist the temptation of propping up political parties espousing moderate progress within the bounds of the law. @

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