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Anarchist-Communism and Elections

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This article was written back in 2003 and was part of the Chilean discussion on the coming local elections at the time and the way many comrades wanted to dedicate the bulk of our resources (both financial and human) to anti-electoralism. As well, there was a debate as we were starting to run into elections in universities, schools, trade unions and community organisations and some said that anarchists were against voting in any form. Some of the issues involved in these debates appear again and again, and they reflect deeper political questions. This article was originally published in the Chilean anarchist-communist magazine "Hombre y Sociedad", No.18-19, second term of 2004.

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the anarcho-syndicalist generation of the '50s, that led to the creation of the CUT, having Ernesto Miranda at the front of this group, is there for everyone to know, as well as the work of the new generation of anarchist communists carried on in the community, students and workers' organisations.

Every time there are elections, the walls of the streets are all painted with the name of this or that candidate, with this or that slogan, with promises that, this time we mean it, things will change. The people passing by are well accustomed to this familiar view, repeated every couple of years: the streets end up filthy with all that rubbish that will only be washed away by winter's rain.

And among all that bunch of candidates and slogans, there are, of course, the always present slogans calling not to vote: in this camp it is almost all of the left that proclaims itself to be revolutionary. That said, many among them are calling not to vote because of their own inability to carry their own candidates and not really for any deeper political issues (the recent experience of PODEMOS is good proof of that, where once champions of the no vote, are turned into candidates of the brand new political coalition). Some others will have more reasons than purely logistical issues. And there again we can find a wide range of reasons for calling not to vote: from those who do not want to give any credit to this Constitution manufactured under Pinochet, to those who oppose any form of "power".

And among those arguments, we find frequently some more or less well known slogans, over-repeated, signed up with a circled A. Those are the anarchists to be sure. No one can be really surprised that anarchists adopt this position; so we are not even asked for our reasons behind this, usually, only visceral rejection. No, there's no need of that: being an anarchist, in fact, seemingly means not to run into elections (please not the emphasis). As a matter of fact, often anarchism is reduced, whether in bad faith or ignorance, to anti-parliamentarism. And, it has to be said, there are too many among those who claim to be anarchists that reduce their activity only to that.

When it comes to elections, we have to recognize, as anarchists, that this is usually dealt with in an abstract fashion, without any analysis of the context. This is all quite odd, if we take into account the fact that elections have traditionally been used by many anarchists as a pretext to go to the streets to demonstrate or to do some agitation. . . . just not to forget the good old custom. However, the lack of reflection is usually appalling: political analysis is bartered in exchange for a couple of pre-manufactured and visceral formulas, for dogmatism short in words

(generally consisting of insults to left and right). In such a situation, it is easy for the slogan to displace reflection while taking its place. This is a worrying situation, for when the lack of arguments and of solid thought become hegemonic, when the theoretical misery becomes the norm, there's often fertile ground for opportunism, simplistic views and for all the sorts of deviations that they can carry in their bag. Thus, the foundations have been laid for an erratic practice.

Among the arguments we encounter which "justify" the anarchist position of rejection of elections, we find, first of all, those who have a "moralizing" nature. These are the weakest ones. . . dealing with the personal qualities of the individuals that run as candidates (they are thieves, they lie, etc.), and thus, they can be counter-argued on the same grounds, avoiding the really political issues. Whether politicians are thieves or not (and the majority, in fact, are) is not the relevant issue; at most, this argument can be used as a weapon between rival candidates, but it fails to get to the root of the problem.

Other times there's a gross view of the problem, by giving it an abstract consideration, in which the "method" (voting) is confused with the institutions where it is exercised. Therefore, all sorts of elections (whether in an assembly, in a trade union, in a sports club, as well as presidential ones, of course) appear to be basically the same, and "impurity" is contained in the very act of voting. We, anarchists, do not get stained in any kind of elections, so we can keep are "purity" . . . How to make decisions, how to elect delegates and representatives, something what is above everything else a matter of practical order, is something never to be clarified satisfactorily by those who advocate this position (always consensus?! Arbitrarily picking people?!). There's supposes to be something "evil", some impure and corrupting essence in the very act of voting, independent of its context. Voting, as a mechanism, is seen to take a magic and evil dimension in the mythological minds of some anarchists who give in a certain type of "voting fetishism".

Anarchism, first of all, has nothing against voting as a mechanism, as a method to decide practical matters, as it is making some decisions once the different positions have been debated and exposed, or as it is the election of some delegate or representative. What's really important

our ideas to become hegemonic has to be won at the grassroots, in the assemblies, without abusing our charge as representative.

Those four points, we believe, are of paramount importance to develop a correct line in relation to elections in social organisations. Some years ago, the election of a trade unionist close comrade to a major position in the national confederation of labour (CUT) was an excellent example of how a wonderful opportunity of work in the labour movement was wasted. First, for there was a previous work, no matter how insufficient, with different trade unions and associations which were committed to creating a new type of trade unionism. What we lacked, was a coherent tactic with that force and the candidacy of the comrade, who ended up isolated, could not pose the problem of a new form of trade unionism, and did not contribute, in the end, to the constitution of a current that could gain momentum of the process of accumulation of forces started before hand and which had one of its most interesting moments in the birth of the Multisindical, in mayday 1998.

On the contrary, the current participation of libertarians in the leadership of community and student organisations, is a good example of how the struggle for these spaces, while accompanied by a previous work at the grassroots, by a democratizing project, by a specific programme of demands and struggle, and by an ethic and libertarian style of political work, can only strengthen libertarian influence on the popular quarter and raise the levels of organisation and struggle of the people. And this also helped us to constitute broader networks for the convergence of those who, from the popular struggle, contribute to forging a libertarian project: the existence of FeL (libertarian students' network) is part of that process.

We cannot assume that struggle in trade unionist and students elections (legitimate spaces, created by the very people on struggle — and sometimes degenerated by bureaucracies — that have nothing to do in nature with the bourgeois class machine of the State) mean inherently, our decline into being "corruptible". That fear to be "corrupted" by "power" (!) in this case is just not justified, and impossible to happen if we are to stick to the four ideas given before hand. It is only political coherence, a libertarian style of political work and the existence of clear mechanisms of participation that can serve as a guarantee against it. The legacy of

are. True, our activity cannot be limited to the struggle for representative positions in social organisations, like many other political groupings; our activity, above everything else has to be in the grassroots. But too often we dismiss chances to go for the representative positions because we believe that our very presence in the assembly is enough. We believe that to be our strong point: however, we need that grassroots work to be expressed as well in every single level of the organisations where we are working, and such a thing does not represent at all a departure from our principles as long as we are clear of the following:

That to participate in the electoral struggle for representative positions has to be the expression of a previous work at the grassroots, for real, that gives a ground and legitimacy to our participation. Without this previous work, without starting to build up from below, the dispute over the representative positions constitutes the same top-down logic of other political sectors.

That our participation has not to be, in any case, like any other group; we always have to push forward a project of internal democratization not limited to representation spaces, but also pushed from the grassroots — empowering it with the ultimate say in crucial issues. This means to implement in practice democratic principles like assemblies, accountability, organisational channels from the bottom up, etc. . . .

Never to confuse tactic with strategy: political hegemony in popular, social or mass organisations is not an end on itself. It is only important as long as it helps us push forward real changes well beyond the boundaries of the organisation itself, at the level of the popular actors, threatening the foundations of capitalist society. In brief, we do not care about winning the elections in a trade union for the sake of it, but in what way this helps the accumulation of a revolutionary force. The end goal is not to linger forever in the struggle for reforms, struggle we do not dismiss at all, but we want to make way to the revolutionary changes towards the deliverance of the oppressed and the exploited.

And it is not in any way less important a strict libertarian ethic: we cannot neutralize our own ideas, our own programme. Not because we become representatives of some organisation, we have to silence our ideas. That said, we cannot impose them either. The struggle for

is the context where this mechanism is exercised¹. Anarchists are not, by definition, against “elections” as a mechanism; if in local or national elections we call not to vote, is because of the context in which this vote is exercised; within the framework of the State, which thus can validate its domination over those of us who are excluded from decision making (who coincidentally, happen to be the same people who are excluded from the businessmen feast). When we call not to vote in this kind of elections, what we are really calling for is the struggle against State and Capitalism, not against “elections” as an event. Our opposition, so, is not so much against to voting as to the whole of the State apparatus.

This is what leads us to the root of the problem, is it the managing of the system what’s wrong? Or is it necessary to overcome in a revolutionary way the current system? And this is, precisely, the central issue from which the bourgeois elections always take us apart, helping in the way to clean the ugly face of capitalism.

Another perverse effect of bourgeois elections is to create dissociation in our very existence; elections create an artificial, ad-hoc, fictitious space for politics, for the power share. This is precisely the underlying logic of the State. And it is at this point that a radical criticism from the anarchists should be made against this understanding of politics: because in our conception, power should be exercised by the people themselves, in its own spaces, in all areas of our lives, and not only in “ready-made-spaces”.

For bourgeois power, though ideologically denies this, though ideologically manifests itself only in certain artificial spaces, in spite of their ideological platitudes of “free-will”, it penetrates deep in our lives, sneaks

¹ Something similar could be said of the discussion around “democracy”; too much ink has been wasted in debating the topic in abstract, independently of the concept behind the term. This situation somehow reflects the dialogue between to deaf persons, claiming some yes to democracy and the others no to democracy, without asking each other really what they do understand for democracy. Obviously, popular demands for democracy, mean something very similar to bourgeois democracy standing on the class contradictions. And when the revolutionary press has attacked “democracy”, this is a way to unveil the oppression behind the concept of the consensus politics and the democracy of the rich.

in every single aspect of our existence. Because of this, popular power has to face it in the same fashion, mastering our whole lives, completely.

Therefore, elections take us apart from our concrete problems (with the illusion of solving them) and generate a space for what is “political” that is alien to the masses. However, without noticing it, many anarchists fall into this trap as the rest of the reformist left which carries on this narrow framework of what’s “political” most of its activity, leaving aside or channelling grassroots work for the sake of the electoral circus. Thus, they validate the bourgeois conception of politics. Many anarchists, to be opposition, act in a similar way: they appear, just like the candidates, only in election times to tell people not to vote. And instead of counting votes, they count people not voting or spoilt votes, as if that mattered any more than struggle and real organisation.

Just like candidates, they have their own electoral option: no vote. But thus they contribute to the reduction of the framework of what is political to the State, more so than to a real work in the grassroots, a daily work, a work to strengthen the class and social actors with a revolutionary prospect. Our action, turns into a spectacle ad-hoc to the spaces generated by the bourgeoisie to express politics.

Does this mean to be indifferent to elections? Does it mean not to take a stand? Not at all. Surely, we need a clear stand against the democratic-bourgeois machine, and therefore, against any form of management of oppression and misery; but we need to be as clear as possible. IT IS NO GOOD to have that many people not voting; effectiveness of anarchist propaganda should be measured not by people not turning out to vote, but by our influence over the degree of combativeness and organisation of the popular masses. The system is already discredited; our real work is to show, through propaganda and deeds, that this system should and ought to be changed.

Our propaganda should be focused, before anything else, towards strengthening struggle and organisation of people; popular organisation and struggle are the best weapons against the State and Capital at their very foundations. This means for anarchist to pass from activism towards militancy (what implies, obviously, more of a systematic, constant and coordinated work, tending to develop the different actors of popular struggle, whereas activism goes always behind the contingency).

From the above mentioned, we can deduce the frivolous misconception implied in such declarations “we are anarchists for we do not run into elections”, what is an impoverished and gross version of the basic tenets of anarchism. Our politics do NOT derive from the fact of not participating in elections, but is the non participation in the elections what is derived from our politics. And the crucial point in question is, precisely, how to build popular power.

Not participating into bourgeois elections cannot be considered one of the political tenets of anarchist revolutionary militancy, but this should derive naturally from a strategy of construction in the heart of the working class.

Today it is as necessary as ever to know how to build up a road for those who we call in to take part in the struggle against the system, and thus to go beyond a kind of naive anarchism, sometimes a bit childish, plagued of dogmatism and visceral phraseology.

We have to put the record straight: for anarchist-communists there’s no room in bourgeois elections, because our natural space to build up popular power, to resist and to struggle is somewhere else — in our communities, universities, schools and workplaces.

And what about other elections?

Precisely because of the above mentioned lack of serious reflection about the matters of method and political positions, there’s often a negative attitude from anarchist in regard to “any kind of elections”. As our criticism was one of the very action of voting, independent of the context and content of it! This confuses things up when it comes to the difference between participating in the State and participating in social and popular organisations (trade unions, community organisations, and so on). Anarchist presence in the latter is not only positive, but necessary if we are to guarantee some level of influence in process of social construction for the long term.

Our absence from those spaces, historically, has meant to leave the doors wide open to reformism and all sorts of authoritarians. It is necessary for anarchists to create some real impact in those places where we