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Electoral Politics and the Left: An Overview

Should the left engage in electoral politics? The question is at least as old as Lenin who gave an affirmative answer: yes, the Bolsheviks should participate in the “arch-reactionary Duma.”¹ But Lenin, like every good revolutionary before and since, also believed that tactics should be determined by the particular situation. As he said: “. . . It is a very great mistake indeed to apply this experience [electoral participation in the Duma] blindly, imitatively and uncritically to *other* conditions and to *other* situations.”² Hence, there is no fixed Leninist position on elections for it would be very “unLeninist” to apply a tactical judgment formulated in the Czarist Russia of 1908-1917 to the United States of today.

So the question restated is: should the American left engage in the electoral politics of the 1980s? Inquiries of this sort often assume that with enough analysis a discernibly correct answer will be forthcoming as might happen with a mathematical problem. But tactical problems need the feedback of events and further practice, and even after much experience it is not always easy to say what are the most effective means of advancing the political struggle. So without hoping I can resolve the matter to everyone’s satisfaction—or even to my own—I will explore the question of the left’s involvement in electoral politics.

At the onset we should avoid the posture of leftist superiority which presumes that electoral politics is so thoroughly a ruling class ruse as to be unworthy of our serious concern and that those who run for office (or even write articles about running for office) manifest an insufficient understanding of the mystifications of the bourgeois political order. This view has an undeniable sweep to it but it needs to be demonstrated rather than asserted. If we conclude that elections should be shunned as a subterfuge, we should explain how and why that is the case.

Whether or not the left should participate might depend on what kind of participation we have in mind. Consider the options:

1. Supporting one or another major party candidate.
2. Supporting a progressive non-socialist candidate.
3. Supporting an explicitly socialist party candidate.

By “support” I mean of course voting, campaign work, contributions, running for office, or any combination of the above.

The Lure of the Lesser Evil

Some socialists continue to involve themselves in major party contests for the same reason as do millions of others: out of fear of one or another candidate. Thus we are urged to support Carter to stop Reagan, or support Kennedy or Anderson to stop Carter, or McGovern to stop Nixon, or Humphrey to stop Nixon, or Johnson to stop Goldwater, or Hindenberg to stop Hitler. Known to all of us as “the lesser of two evils,” this phenomenon is probably the single greatest inducement to electoral participation, a time and again millions to go the polls not so much to vote *for* but *against* someone.

It is a marvelous device. You offer the people a candidate who violates their interests and who serves the ruling class, then you offer them another candidate who promises to be even worse. Thus you not so much *offer* them a choice as *force* them into a choice. It is another example of how, under capitalism, supply creates demand.

Mind you, I am bemoaning the phenomenon, but not making a judgment about the correct tactic. The truth is, there was a very real difference between Hindenberg and Hitler—both anti-communist enemies of the working class and willing servants of the cartels—a difference experienced by millions. And maybe there is a significant difference between Reagan and Carter: Latin America might well feel it in the years ahead. (This is certainly the opinion of so eminent a socialist as Fidel Castro, who announced that Reagan must be defeated in November because he is a menace to world peace and humanity.)³ What I am noting here is the dynamic that extracts a reluctant support and legitimating response from citizens who, knowing that neither party serves their interests, might otherwise not bother to vote or might actually support a third party, but who instead engage in a holding action trying to stave off a real or imagined rightist deluge.

The lesser-evil game can go on forever. Eventually some socialists decide that endorsing either of the two-party candidates—unless under the most extraordinary circumstances—legitimizes the capitalist two-party monopoly, does nothing to advance the struggle for socialism, and violates their own political interests.

Forward with the “Lesser Good”

Some socialists give support to progressive, or supposedly progressive non-socialist candidates. While these “progressives” fall far short of what a socialist might want, the argument goes, they have a wider appeal and might even win office and institute worthwhile changes. Even if not our first preference as measured against the avowedly Marxist candidates, the non-socialist progressive is said to represent the more practical choice. This strategy, a somewhat more positive variation of the lesser evil approach, might be called supporting “the lesser good.”

Sometimes the lesser good candidate is still a major party product. Thus Michael Harrington and other leaders of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee—most of them not Marxists—gave early support to Teddy Kennedy (without even waiting to hear what Kennedy had to say on most of the major issues), not because the Senator was the lesser evil but because he seemed the most “practical,” even if palest good. DSOC advocates working within the more progressive of the two capitalist parties. It remains to be seen whether or not “boring from within” does not lead to being buried alive.⁴ There is a tendency for some leftists to think the center is moving closer to them as they move closer to the center. Some of the Eurocommunist party leaders seem to suffer from this optical illusion.

Many socialists work for one or another progressive third party, one that usually falls short of a specifically socialist position but which promises to have a broader appeal than a Marxist party, again a matter of supporting the “lesser good.” Barry Commoner’s Citizens Party would fit this designation as might Dr. Spock’s Peoples Party, the Peace and Freedom Party in California, Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party in 1948, the American Labor Party in New York in the 1940s and early 1950s and other small progressive third parties like the Liberty Union Party in Vermont in the 1970s. Groups like the Citizens Party attempt to gather trade unionists, the poor, environmentalists, intellectuals and minorities under one tent, while formulating a comprehensive anti-business—albeit not explicitly anti-capitalist—program. The program falls short of presenting a socialist analysis and an avowedly socialist alternative. It is one thing, in the manner of a Ralph Nader, to attack the “excesses” and “abuses” of large corporations—with the implication that these things can be changed with better regulations and more dedicated regulators; it is something else to attack *capitalism* as an entire system that must undergo a revolutionary transformation. While frequently denouncing the effects of the system, progressive third parties seldom get around to launching a systemic critique.

Campaigning for Socialism

At some point many socialists decide they should work for socialist candidates and not for some lesser evil or lesser good. But upon entering electoral politics, they find themselves subjected to the very two-party monopoly game they are trying to change. As we know, the electoral and representative systems are controlled by the two-party monopoly. Here I will only briefly summarize some of the specifics.⁵

(1) Election laws are written and enforced by officials of the major parties with an intent to limiting the field of competitors. Minor parties in many states simply cannot get on the ballot because of unrealistic petition and registration requirements, exorbitant filing fees, official harassment, intimidation and numerous legalistic entanglements. These hurdles are not always insurmountable but the question is: is it worth the enormous investment of effort and money? Couldn't the party's resources be put to better use in other undertakings?

(2) The representative system with its winner-take-all, single-member district pluralities and its at-large elections, gerrymandering, redistricting, imbalances in district populations, the electoral college and non-partisan elections provides built-in discouragements for minor parties and majoritarian advantages for the Democrats and Republicans. Thus even when they win a substantial portion of the vote, minor parties fail to win representation.

(3) Campaign politics is above all a money game—more so each year. Here the left's handicap is so glaring as to require little comment. The inability to buy television time becomes a great liability given the fact that socialist parties are denied national media news coverage. Major party presidential candidates are given from ten to fifteen minutes network television exposure during *each day* of the campaign, while socialist candidates are lucky if they get a few minutes throughout the *entire* campaign.

I ran for Congress on the Liberty Union ticket in Vermont in 1974. Our party's candidates and handful of volunteer works relied on unemployment checks, personal savings and austerity to get through the six months of campaigning. By all accounts our efforts were a "success": we fielded candidates for all the state-wide offices and for numerous local ones; we reached tens of thousands of people; our vote grew from the usual two or three percent to five and seven percent.⁶ After the election, Vermont news commentators talked about the emergence of a "three-party system." But we emerged from that contest exhausted and insolvent, both personally and as a party, and Liberty Union never again equaled its 1974 performance.

The truth is there is no third-party electoral road to power in a system

constructed to preserve the capitalist two-party monopoly. Leftists who decide to make the long march along the campaign trails, soon discover that the electoral system absorbs large quantities of their time, money and energy while leaving them no closer to the forces which exercise power in this society. After an election the minor party ends up with a small percentage of the vote, a load of debts, and exhausted and sometimes disillusioned party workers.

On those rare occasions radical candidates win office, they discover still other deflative forces lying in wait. They find themselves confronted by budgetary exigencies, enveloped in obscure executive or legislative tasks, outflanked by entrenched interests, obliged to deal with the dominant capitalist forces on their own terms—until they begin to take on an appearance not unlike the people they replaced. This can be true not only of individual socialist candidates but of an entire socialist party.⁷

The Electoral Tactic

Is there, then, anything to say *for* leftist electoral participation or is it just “ritual behavior in the face of disaster”? Even if one rejects the electoral strategy, are not elections—in some places on some occasions—still a worthwhile tactic? Certainly when Lenin urged the Bolsheviks to participate in the Duma elections he had no electoral *strategy*, that is, he was not anticipating an electoral road to power, but he did see participation as a worthwhile *tactic*, another means of gaining support and advancing the struggle.

Today, something of the same argument could be made: even if a socialist party has no immediate hope or even long range intention of building a winning electoral coalition, political campaigns provide at least some opportunity to reach people. In ordinary times one cannot just knock on people's doors and ask, “Can I talk to you about socialism?” But during a campaign one can pretty much do that, and enjoy a certain measure of legitimacy doing it.⁸

In the 1974 campaign in Vermont mentioned earlier, Liberty Union candidates distributed literature at factory gates, talked to people on street corners and at shopping centers, spoke at church gatherings, labor union meetings, groups of League of Women Voters and on college campuses. Each of the state-wide candidates appeared on every radio station in Vermont at least once, was interviewed by the major daily newspapers and shared numerous public platforms with their Democratic and Republican opponents including a few television debates. As the LU candidate for Congress I even

won the endorsement of two of the down-state liberal daily newspapers (which made me wonder what I was doing wrong), an unusual accomplishment for an avowedly socialist candidate in the United States.

However discouraging it is to fight the two-party monopoly under the rigged rules set by the two parties, we did gain an access to the public seldom available during non-electoral times. For all the handicaps we carried, portions of our message got through. Many persons not connected with our party observed that LU had a noticeably progressive impact on the range of political debate and the level of political awareness in Vermont.

Whether electoral participation is or is not a correct tactic, I think, depends on a number of considerations:

—Will it provide opportunities for raising political consciousness commensurate with the effort it demands? Much here depends on time, place and other particular circumstances. In some states electoral contests might provide a rich opportunity for political outreach and propaganda, while other states may prove too prohibitive.

—Can a third party invest a major portion of its meager resources in election contests without neglecting other more enduring forms of political work and without becoming an election party as such?

—By entering electoral politics does one lend a certain legitimacy to the very political game one is trying to expose as a charade? In other words, aren't we sending a contradictory message to people: "Voting is a hoax—vote for me." If voting in a bourgeois election is an ineffective way of accomplishing anything, then why should we urge people to vote for socialists? Perhaps we get around this when we make it clear that the vote is a protest one, and not an act of sovereignty as the mythmakers would have it.

Most disputes among socialists, noted Eugene Debs almost 70 years ago, are not over goals but how to achieve them.⁹ The left still divides on tactics. People involved in community organizing are attacked for "localism." Those who organize mass demonstrations around single-issue protests are called "rent-a-crowd" tacticians. Those who engage in civil disobedience are on a "moralistic guilt trip." Those who work in cultural areas are dismissed as "culturalists." Those in bourgeois trade unions are trapped in "reformism." Those who engage in electoral contests are labeled "social democrats." And almost all the above have been judged at one time or another to be guilty of "mindless activism" or "opportunism."

As a Marxist who believes the United States needs a socialist revolution, I devoted six months of my life, ten and twelve hours a day, seven days a week, talking to people, agitating, educating, and in various ways making propaganda for socialism during the LU Vermont campaign only to overhear an acquaintance of mine remark derisively: "Parenti ran for *Congress*. That shows you what kind of politics *he* has." (This individual maintains his

ideological acumen and militancy by doing nothing.) The error of so many critics is to mistake form for content. As Lenin reminds us, there are times when bourgeois forms present opportunities to inject a socialist content, and these opportunities should not be passed up if we want to do something more than just pose for socialism. For Lenin, finding the effective path to revolution was a matter of constant probing and experimenting—under circumstances that can appear most discouraging and unpromising.¹⁰

It is difficult to measure the relative efficacy of tactics, to anticipate and even perceive outcomes. Hence, we should be more supportive although not necessarily uncritical of those who are willing to make an effort. To repeat, we discover correct tactics not only with study but with practice; thus many who attempt to carry on the struggle against capitalism on capitalism's own turf are not being naive—since it often happens to be the only turf available—but are probing and trying to discover a means of advancing the cause.

As it is, we are too quick to criticize. No one seems sure what will work, but too many seem sure about what will not work. And those who do no work at all, seem surest of all. Of one thing we can be certain: doing nothing doesn't work.*

Notes

* Bernard Sanders, a left political activist, toppled a five-term conservative Democratic incumbent in Vermont. A decade ago, Sanders was one of the founders of Vermont's Liberty Union, an anti-war leftist third party. To this day its candidates win 5 to 10 percent of the vote in statewide elections. Sanders won 8 percent of the vote in at least two of his four statewide campaigns. He ran twice for U.S. Senator and twice for governor in the early 1970s. He left the Liberty Union in 1977.

1. V. I. Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism, an Infantile Disorder (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1970), *passim*.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

3. See Castro's remarks in the *New York Times*, July 28, 1980.

4. As of July 1980 there was talk among DSOC people of withdrawing support for the faltering Kennedy and backing a third party candidate.

5. For a fuller treatment see my *Democracy for the Few*, third edition, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), chapter eleven.

6. For a description and analysis of that campaign see my "A Third Party Emerges in Vermont," *Massachusetts Review*, 16, Summer 1975, pp. 490-504.

7. See the study of the British Labor Party: Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, second edition (London: Merlin Press, 1972).

8. In fact, religious groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses do solicit from door to door and other groups proselytize at airports and parks and other public places. There is probably nothing to prevent political groups from doing the same and some occasionally do. During campaign time however, such efforts tend to have a greater legitimacy and a higher level of citizen attention and response.

9. See Eugene V. Debs, "Sound Socialist Tactics," *International Socialist Review*, February 1912.

10. Lenin, "Left-Wing Communism," pp. 120-121 and *passim*.