

Beyond November: Thoughts on politics, social movements, and the 2012 elections

Category: Electoral Politics

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Marx wrote in *The Civil War in France* that every few years workers got to decide which members of the ruling class were to misrepresent them. How right he was. And is. That is uncontestable. What's at issue are the implications. What politics is necessary in a formal democracy where elites have a stranglehold on national election outcomes and even candidate selection? What is to be done when the working class acts less like a class for itself and more like a crush of sharp-elbowed shoppers at a Walmart Presidents' Day sale?

While movements for social and economic justice are in the final instance the agents of historical change, election efforts should reflect those movement interests. Yet the form electoral action takes rarely jibes with movement needs.

In no advanced industrial nation, and especially not the United States, have the needs of social movements and electoral gains been conjoined. Worldwide, the Occupiers deny a connection is even warranted—the Spanish Indignados are the most vocal—saying that political parties of the Left and Right inevitably work to maintain social order. Descriptively, it's true; that is how governments of the Left and Right have acted, at least since the Second World War. But it's not inevitable, and abandoning politics is no solution.

In Western Europe, the social-democratic parties act as the kinder, gentler face of neoliberalism. In the United States, the labor movement can't point to a signal federal legislative victory since the 1970 passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act—and that under a Republican president. In most developing countries, politics is a reflection of the competing demands of comprador and local bourgeois factions; working-class struggles are subterranean. The magnificent Arab Spring was remarkable for what it was and not for what it portended. The contenders in Egypt's first elections were the army and the Muslim Brotherhood, both with infrastructures in place and both former collaborators with the hated Mubarak regime.

In 2012, the US presidential election will once again be decided not on wants or needs but on fear. With neither candidate likely to gin up much energy for themselves based on program, personality, or merit, the election will go to the campaign that scares key voting blocs the most about the opposition.

The prospects of selling Obama as the preferred candidate are daunting, if worth doing at all. With his proliferation of the national security state, his refusal to put juice behind the Conyers jobs bill, his water-carrying for the insurance companies and destruction of any near-term possibility for single-payer health care, his failures on card check and other labor law reforms, his refusal to treat Wall Street as a criminal enterprise, his embrace of reactionary education philosophies, his incursive black-ops foreign policy, and his ten o'clock scholar's embrace of gay marriage, his is an administration not to praise but to damn.

So what to do? Or how do we even think about what to do? That's not like asking, "Why is there no labor party in the United States?" Political sociologist Robin Archer offers a compelling argument

that points out specific conditions—the weakness of the early industrial union organizing efforts, the level of state repression, the structural divides determined by religious affiliations, the bonkers politics of Daniel DeLeon’s Socialist Labor Party and the equally malignant and self-interested craft union response—conditions that in combination were true nowhere else. These inhibited any class-based politics, even of the most tepid kind. Archer explains why the US was late to the game, if not AWOL, but not why corporate ideology is still the common coin of both parties, let alone what can be done today.

Radicals, since at least the 1936 reelection of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, have battled over two key electoral strategies: relate in whatever way possible to progressive forces around the Democratic Party or denounce the two-party system as a sham and build a progressive third party. The two don’t exhaust the list of left possibilities, but they take to the field at election time as dueling perspectives. We find the first simplistic and the second at least a telescoping of events.

Electoral Politics and the Burden of History

Veteran labor activist Bill Fletcher, Jr, writing in his Organizing Upgrade blog, argues that election perspectives need to be strategic, and that dismissing electoral politics as hopeless or building third parties out of whole cloth “are actually unpolitical and lack any sort of concrete analysis.” He’s right. Absent strategy, anything else is just expressing a shopping preference.

Strategic planning includes sizing up your own side’s strengths. Frankly, we’re too weak to have any effect on the Democratic Party network at the national level.

At the same time, we can’t build much of a third party with impossible state ballot access requirements, winner-take-all elections and a lack of institutional support. Anything a third party can do—anything a third party *should* do—can also be done in local and state Democratic primaries.

Parties are not creatures of desire alone. They are political expressions of movements arising at historical conjunctures, or comprise decades of work culminating in effective interventions in crisis situations. The last third-party effort institutionalized nationwide was the Republican Party. Not only was it the outcome of the struggle over slavery—something the Whigs could not get right—but the Lincoln election was the proximate cause of the South Carolina secession and the Civil War that followed. The GOP’s creation was not epiphenomenal; it was structurally driven, and the war emerged as the central and as yet unrivaled organizing event of the modern American party system.

Yes, radical parties had influence, too. The Socialist Party that thankfully succeeded the SLP in prominence excelled before and during the First World War, electing thousands of local officeholders. But it sent just two members to Congress—one from New York and one from Milwaukee, cities with substantial foreign-born populations with radical views and roots in European working-class organizations. The party had its faults, including an electoral orientation that could not abide the direct-action tactics of its own supporters, but it acted as the party of a class—something no third party can do today.

Absent mass upheavals that make electoral reform a concession, US third-party efforts are also handicapped by a political system that is not analogous to that of any other liberal-democratic state. Here, it’s the state, not the parties, that controls who can join (anyone who registers). The parties have no sway over who registers, runs in their primaries, or holds office under their name. Yes, election lawyer-wizards do challenge dissident Democrats’ election petitions at the behest of county-based, paid political functionaries. The outcome: candidate suppression, especially of the novice hopeful. But it’s state law, not party manipulation, that is responsible for voter suppression, the more toxic threat to free elections.

Understanding the Democrats

That complicates things is that Democrats themselves talk about one big party, under one big tent, dancing to one tune. It's rubbish. The US effectively has 435 separate Democratic Party organizations corresponding to incumbents or challengers in each congressional district, with the loosest of national affiliations. Politics USA-style is candidate-, not party-driven.

It's not the party that does the lion's share of fundraising, either. It's the candidates, and—thanks to the Supreme Court—the virtually flying-under-the-radar corporate-run Super pacs. One effect of the McCain-Feingold campaign finance law is that even fewer dollars will be coordinated by the national parties. The AFL-CIO, its numerous constituent unions, and others expect to ride that money-churning tiger, but the advantage goes to business.

The Democrats are not even a rule-from-the-top party that disciplines its elected officials, though under Rahm Emanuel, progressive candidates were pushed aside by the party's congressional fundraising arms in favor of more mainstream and ostensibly electable moderates. Party discipline at times is enforced by promising or denying "pork" or committee chair posts, yet for all those cozy arrangements, party politics is decentralized. This means grassroots efforts to elect allies or punish enemies are viable.

Want to punish incumbents? Primary 'em up. Even if you lose, you've killed their summer and made your point. The Left is in no position to affect national party policy, but it can still hold a local candidate's feet to the fire.

Structural Barriers and Coalition "Parties"

Short of storming the Winter Palace, politics *requires* coalitions. But what kind of coalitions? Both main parties are coalitions of disparate elements. Ostensibly, class-based parties in a parliamentary system function the same way, with the deals cut after the election, but they have the advantage of raising sharp differences during campaigns and allowing radicals a role, at least before entering government.

The US party coalitions are not particularly unified. Both have a hard core of ideological or interest-group supporters, and a periphery of idiosyncratic centrist allies. The cores are always dissatisfied that their interests aren't served, while the moderates entertain fantasies of a great party of the center-right, which would ostensibly sweep any election. Today, the chief exponent of that view is the drearily predictable *New York Times* scribe Thomas Friedman.

It should be no surprise, then, that every Democratic president since the Civil War has come from the middle of the coalition. That's the nature of the Democratic Party, and it is that way because of the reality of the US political system. Changes in state laws permitting multiple-party endorsements, the alternate vote, proportional representation, same-day registration, and the like would vastly improve prospects for third parties, but winning these means fighting state-by-state. Even a constitutional amendment requires some thirty states to agree. It's a fight worth having, but short of that, or short of a cataclysm delegitimizing the main parties, coalition politics and the sort of incrementalism revolutionaries despise—in part because there are so few increments—is the only contemporary politics possible.

That's why the links institutions like the NAACP and the AFL-CIO have with the Democratic Party won't be overcome by an act of will or even the election of a new generation of Marxists to a handful of top union leadership posts, as desirable as that would be.

Those on the Left who call for a third party are basing their choice on a prayer, not a plan. Think

of Shakespeare's Glendower boasting that "I can call spirits from the vasty deep." To which Hotspur aptly replies, "Why, so can I, or so can any man; But will they come when you do call for them?"

Even Hotspur's advice, "Tell truth and shame the devil," has its limits. The Left has ample truths deserving of a hearing, but given its weakness and disconnect from the lives of working people, who's listening? And given that we can't deliver, and that our self-appointed vanguard tribunes know they can't deliver, it's like hawking shoddy goods to demand that working people must, as at least one sect said in all seriousness, "Break with the elephant; break with the ass. Build a party of the working class."

Support for a nationwide third party today isn't a political response, but a propagandistic one. It's also bad propaganda because it assumes that the Democrats are hegemonic due to voter ignorance. It's not illusions that drive voters. Asking working people to forgo their only practical form of politics is like urging the religious to abandon their gods. That's something even the twenty-four-year-old Marx knew was nonsense, when he wrote that the world of atheists "reminds one of children, assuring everyone who is ready to listen to them that they are not afraid of the bogey man."

The Democrats as a coalition are hegemonic because they provide a service, finite as it is, that is indispensable for institutions, whether they be unions, social service providers, or community-based organizations.

Assessing Left Party Campaigns

If parties grow from movements and from cultures of resistance, where is the utility or veracity in claiming that today's Green Party represents a core wing of environmentalism, let alone civil rights, peace, labor, immigrant rights, or others? In many ways, the Green campaign for governor of New York in 2010 had a model program and an attractive, knowledgeable candidate in Howie Hawkins. And that was all it had, though that was enough to secure state ballot status through 2014. It's been somnolent since.

Dan La Botz, an articulate campaigner on the Socialist Party line for Senate in Ohio, ran on a platform lightyears ahead of anything the two major parties offered. He declared:

"We need to organize a movement. To fight for jobs and full employment. To win health care for all. To really confront the environmental crisis by turning from coal and oil to wind, solar, and hydrothermal. To end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I want to be the Senator who speaks for that movement."

We wish he could, too. La Botz's traction—despite his garnering "more than 25,000 votes for socialism in Ohio," as his campaign put it—was the result less of his ability to front for mass movements and more that the Democratic candidate had no chance of winning. La Botz was a protest candidate at a propitious moment. That's no knock. Often the Left can't manage even that.

Here we make no claim that La Botz or Hawkins could have made a difference running in statewide Democratic Party primaries. We do suggest that insurgents backed by reform groups with local standing could run in area primary races and win.

Unmasking Obama

Still, the issue for November is how we impact political discourse among those living perilous lives.

Someone's got to tell the truth about the scabrous Obama presidency, and it won't come from the

three-wise-monkey approach of the liberal left or the venality and rampant racism of the Right.

Yes, the Republicans are almost always worse, and that algorithm gives Democrats a free ride. The GOP's not always worse, though. PATCO's strike was broken by Ronald Reagan, but the rage that consumed air traffic controllers in 1981 was the accumulation of two decades of pressing grievances against mostly Democratic-appointed heads of the Federal Aviation Administration. No wonder the PATCO leadership made a Faustian bargain to endorse Reagan in 1980 in return for a deal that unraveled over, among other things, acceptance of collective bargaining over wages.

Anyone who says the future of working-class America depends on beating Romney downplays the harm successive Democratic administrations did in shilling for corporate America.

Let's face reality: Obama is the worst Democratic president since Grover Cleveland. He's a Wall Street enabler, and like his sorry predecessors, he's let his agenda be determined by corporate pressure and far-right hysteria.

Just because the worst scum in America want Obama gone, unions neutralized, and the shreds of the welfare state effaced is not reason in itself for the Left to mute criticisms and act the good soldier. The only sound justification given for backing Obama in 2008 was that he'd give the movements enough room and time to grow. We got neither.

The reason that we don't write off Democratic Party campaigns is that at the local level, anyone involved in any sort of community organizing or public-sector bargaining has to have a relationship with some elected officials. And that means visibly supporting them, even if critically. Either that or preparing primary competition. And when a mass left party emerges, it won't be the expression of a rootless counterculture.

But we're not doing our allies any good by echoing the line taken by the AFL-CIO today, which is that the November election poses a choice between two economic worldviews. Would that it were. The real subtext is "Vote Obama: He'll screw us less."

Independent left participation in the 2012 election should be based minimally on preparing people now for the fight we'll be in after the election, no matter which party wins. That means no lionizing Obama and no relying on ghoulish tales about what a GOP monopoly of government and a knuckle-dragging Supreme Court could unleash. Allowing Obama to be reelected without any critique from the Left—even one that is purely propagandistic, as the Green and Socialist parties will offer—only ratifies his centrist approach of cottoning to and co-opting the Right while neutering the Left and any possibility for substantial social gains. We can do better.

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