

Diverting the Spectacle: Radical Students and the Election Season

Another election season dawns, and yet again students like myself are urged to "make our voices heard" by selecting our preferred candidate. Many of us will undoubtedly be caught up in the fervor of rhetoric and promises, some perhaps even believing that *this time* things will be different. As a radical student activist it's often difficult to view this bi-yearly charade as anything other than a perverse blend of distraction and manipulation. Seeing our fellow students fooled over and over again by the same shallow slogans and short-sighted policies, elections can be an exasperating process. However, we can hardly allow such a huge opportunity to engage with the general population to be routinely wasted. So the question then becomes how do we as radical students relate to elections, utilizing them for the cause of revolution without allowing them to corrupt our ideals?

First off, anyone who has examined the US political system can't fail to notice its remarkable ability to represent the interests of the ruling class at the expense of the population in general. It is clear that our elections are bought, not won. With the demystification of Obama, an increasing number of students are awakening to this fact. Though they may still vote for Obama over any of the Republican field, many will do so more out of a lack of options than from any deep-seated belief in his abilities. As leftist students our alternative should not be a different face to vote for, or a begrudging support for the fabled "lesser of two evils," but rather a move for political participation beyond voting.

I can still recall turning 18 and receiving a postcard

from the government emblazoned with the slogan "your vote is your voice." It struck me that the unacknowledged subtext of this was that I don't have a voice outside of the ballot box. This is the ethos put forward by our society as a whole, that political participation means watching the news, choosing a candidate, and then disengaging until the next election cycle. This process is not democracy, but manufactured consent.

Despite this, many people still feel that this process allows them to influence national discourse. While this is fundamentally wrong, at this point in time it is not a productive battle to be fighting. If someone wants to vote, fine, but this should not be where their political participation ends. Gradually, a deeper understanding of the system will no doubt expose the charade of US elections. In the meantime we should advocate for an independent approach to politics. Rather than becoming the passive bi-yearly voter, we should push to challenge the established agenda and to reinterpret the issues from a radical perspective. Protests, public debates, sit-ins, occupations, and most fundamentally *organizing* should be our goals during election season.

Every two years, and particularly during presidential elections, the US political system hands us a fantastic opportunity. Suddenly politics becomes the center of attention; the media, though still vapid, obsessively covers every aspect of the campaign, and citizens are encouraged, in however shallow a manner, to reflect upon the last few years of leadership. Left to its own devices this system functions relatively smoothly, allowing popular frustration to be channeled into a safe, meaningless distraction.

But a good revolutionary rarely leaves the system to its own devices. For us the bottom line of this whole process is that the cameras are rolling and people are listening. Even a relatively small event can disrupt the ongoing spectacle of election season, particularly in the setting of the university. A small march or carefully executed disruption can

cause ripples throughout the population. The two-party system, for all its billions in advertising, is a pretty boring and hollow show. It is our job as radicals to peel back the facade and offer an alternative.

So what are some concrete actions that we can take during election season to spread radical ideas on campuses and in our communities? One of the easiest things is to use the election fervor to get our ideas heard. As election day draws progressively nearer there is always a rising interest in politics across campus. Political events are held with regularity, the school paper begins covering more political issues, and political parties come to campus attempting to sway voters to their side. All of these things present a chance to reach people outside of our usual radical circles. Many of the organizers of official campus events are wary of the criticism that they only cater to the two-party system. This often makes them relatively enthusiastic to give "alternative perspectives" a voice; and the same holds true for many school newspaper editors. The bottom line is that we must use the tools that the system hands us.

While using the established channels in this manner is an important basic step toward challenging the two-party discourse, it can't be the only effort we make. As stated above, we must reach beyond these approved methods and challenge the system through direct action. Established channels are not meant to foster change; rather they are designed to create a show, to provide a shallow level of participation while retaining the basic structures of class domination. They are intended to dissipate political energy, not focus it. Radical change cannot and will not come from a bureaucracy. Because of this, revolutionary students should always be reaching for a more militant and meaningful means of participation. While this can take many forms one of the most effective, especially on college campuses, is direct action, the practice of unmediated political participation. Direct

action can involve anything, from a well-placed banner drop to the camps of Occupy Wall Street. Through such actions we can demonstrate and involve people in an alternative form of discourse, interrupting the scheduled programming of the capitalist system to outline a new perspective. One of the best opportunities for actions of this kind presents itself whenever one of the big political parties holds a large scale event. A carefully orchestrated march or installation can grab headlines and radically shift the discussion.

These actions can look like almost anything, and I wouldn't presume to know what the level of political consciousness on each individual campus is, but the two key things to make sure to keep in mind are organizing and creativity. With respect to organizing: we are trying to build a movement, not just make noise, so our slogans and actions must be tailored to the people we are trying to reach. Shouting about class struggle to people who only associate the term with Stalinism is not a productive or useful enterprise. Some people come to college ready for the revolution, but many need to be brought in and radicalized gradually. Actions must allow space for both. Furthermore, there needs to be a way for people to learn more about one's cause: contact info, meeting times, etc. should be readily available for anyone interested. Otherwise we become interesting but not approachable.

As for utilizing creativity, try to enjoy yourself! Come up with a new or unique way to attack a problem. Capitalist society long ago learned how to deal with traditional protests, trivializing even the largest events. A rally with a speakers' list and chants can still be a powerful unifying event, but it is far from the only option. People, the media, and especially students are often more willing to listen if they are approached in an un-orthodox manner.

As a student at the University of Michigan, I have had the opportunity to plan and participate in a variety of actions. I work with the Student Socialist Union, a

revolutionary multi-tendency anti-capitalist organization, incorporating everything from Socialism through Anarchism. We publish a bi-monthly zine, *The Harbinger*, and in the past we have executed banner drops, and participated in rallies and protests and other direct actions throughout the area. Through all of this I've noticed that the best actions are often those that the organizers feel most passionate about.

With the 2008 collapse and a jobless recovery, Socialism is gaining ground for the first time in a decade. The election season is a magnificent opportunity for us to reach out to students who are unsatisfied with the spectacle, and while I can't offer a definite prescription for revolution, I do know that if there's one constant in every revolution, it's us, the students.

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