

Self Immolation and The Left: The Greens Do It Again!

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Even in the age of extreme reality television, nationally broadcasted suicides remain a blessedly rare occurrence. And so the suicide which occurred during a Huffington Post sponsored debate on third party voting probably should have received more attention than it did.

The act in question was that of Green Party campaign manager Ben Manski who, objecting to condescending and impertinent remarks from the moderator and other participants, stalked off the set, leaving the floor to Matt Stoller, an anti Obama former Democratic Party operative by no means favorable to the Greens, conventional Democratic Party hack Emily Hauser, and, mainly, to Daniel Ellsberg who was recommending a vote for a Obama in swing states.

This should be described as a suicide because in objective political terms it was precisely that. It is, after all, the job of a campaign manager is to acquire votes for his candidate from whatever quarters they are forthcoming. What seems to have been lost on Manski was, first of all, that Ellsberg, while voicing some strategic reservations, had, in fact, stated that he would vote for Manski's candidate Jill Stein in his home state of California.

Second, much more important than this retail political calculus is that, as a few seconds' thought will reveal, the wholesale logic of Ellsberg's position was overwhelmingly in favor of Stein. For the other side of the coin of strategic voting recommended by Ellsberg and others is an explicit endorsement for Stein in the great majority of instances, namely in safe states.

Should progressives actually listen to Ellsberg (and other influential leftists such as Noam Chomsky and Jeff Cohen), Stein could be assured of millions of votes in undisputed states such as New York, California and Illinois. Or in states such as Texas, where Romney is a sure winner, a small percentage but large aggregate numbers of votes would go Stein's way. The result could be the Green Party achieving the holy grail of 5% qualifying them for \$20 million in federal election funds, potentially helping them to establish themselves as a viable, and not merely symbolic alternative.

But rather than trumpeting Ellsberg's endorsement, Manski and Stoller chose to ignore it by focussing on the divisive and comparatively insignificant question of whether swing state voters should deliberately "send a message" to Obama by increasing Romney's chances to win. Stoller went further, doubting whether a Romney victory should be a cause for any particular concern, as there are areas where Obama may turn out to be worse. Regardless of the merits of this position, it is necessarily a speculative one, as no one can predict with any certainty how Romney or Obama will govern.

What is certain is that the votes to be gained in swing states are far fewer than those available to the Greens in safe states. Should the Greens capture these and achieve their 5%, this could, combined with serious organizing at the municipal level, constitute the seeds of an actual left alternative to the Democrats. The development of an electoral wing of the now dormant but hopefully reviving protest movement, much as has Syriza in Greece, would constitute a serious threat to the neo-liberal regime-much more so than the defeat or one of its two hand-picked candidates in a national election.

Finally, Manski could have pointed out that an explicit endorsement of a Green represents a significant concession for many among the left agenda setting media. Neither Ellsberg nor Chomsky,

has, to my knowledge directly endorsed voting for a third party presidential candidate, even in the typically highly qualified and unenthusiastic form in which Chomsky couched his support for Stein this year. For Cohen, who, in a recent interview on the Real News network, defined strategic voting as voting for Obama in contested states and for Stein everywhere else, this was a much bigger step. A founding member of the Progressive Democrats of America, Cohen had both in name and deed, committed himself to reforming the Democratic Party as the only possible vehicle for progressive change. The change of allegiance to the non-partisan "Roots Action" is indicative that the Democrats can no longer count on this contingent for its critical, but effectively largely unconditional support in the past.

It is the catastrophe of the Obama administration which has led to this fracture and it is likely to be among the first of many cracks in Democratic Party edifice which has imprisoned within it leftists, and worse, stunted the left imagination for generations. The best hope of the left is to continue to allow the Democratic Party to undermine its own foundation as the Obama administration turns on and consumes its most loyal supporters-those whom the President's good friend and chief of staff charmingly referred to as "fucking retards."

At the same time, for it to pick up the pieces left by the near total delegitimation of the existing party system, the left needs to be ready with a serious, unified and viable political party capable of competing for and exercising state power .

By contemptuously rejecting Ellsberg's safe states proposal Ben Manski, and others who adopt his suicidal posture, are flushing many thousands of votes down the toilet, and in so doing, have shown they are not interested in joining the battle.

Until they recognize that seriously competing for state power is necessary to achieve it, the left will surely remain in the hole which, as this anecdotes shows, it has, to a significant extent, dug for itself.

JOHN HALLE is Director of Studies in Music Theory and Practice at Bard College.