Anarcho
Obama: The times they are a-changing?
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A few thoughts on Obama's election victory. Yes, it is historic but real change comes from below and anarchists need to stress that.

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It is hard not to be moved by the sight of a black man becoming President of the United States. Nor is it possible not to feel hope at the sight of so many people taking a keen interest in their society, expressing joy at the prospect of change. Nor is seeing the Bush Junta finally get a (limited) comeuppance without some pleasure. Equally, it is hard not to be optimistic about an American election result in which someone labelled by his opponents as a "Marxist" and "socialist" gets the majority. Sure, most people (correctly) would have dismissed this as the nonsense it was, but it suggests that after decades of "socialism for the rich" (neo-liberalism) the prospect of social democratic reforms have lost much of their fear.

In those senses, this is a historic result. However, as anarchists we are aware of the limitations of change via the state. That is why we are anarchists, after all. Obama represents the more progressive (and more sane) wing of the American Business Party so any "change" that may be coming will not challenge the power of capital has over the state. Equally, the powerful economic, political and social interests which ensured 8

years of Bush will not disappear. As with Clinton, that pressure will be placed on Obama to implement "reforms" similar in content and aim (if not quite as extreme) as those that would be implemented by a Republican President. We should not forget that it was Clinton who "reformed" welfare, repealed key regulations on financial markets, presided over record increases in inequality, backed NAFTA and so on. And, of course, if economic pressures do not work there is the state bureaucracy with its network of permanent institutions and officials who can hinder and delay any serious reforms which the capitalist class opposes.

This is not to suggest that the parties are identical. They are not, as can be seen from some of the policies suggested and rhetoric used. Yes, they are both capitalist parties but there are differences which it would be foolish to ignore or deny. This does not mean we need support the Democrats (or Labour in Britain, and so on), it means we need to address the reasons why people did vote for Obama and have hope he will change things for the better when we explain the anarchist case for social transformation from below, by the people themselves.

The audacity of McCain trying to portray himself as the candidate for change was staggering. Yet it is representative of a general disgust of the way America has been heading, something which the 8 years of the Bush Junta has crowned with a particularly incompetent, authoritarian and corrupt reign (which is why Joe-the-Plumber was lauded by McCain while George-the-President was ignored). Looking back, Kerry's defeat in 2004 did have the advantage of allowing the Republicans time to ***really*** expose the bankruptcy of their ideas, agenda and the raw capitalism which they idolise. Not that the party of individual responsibility did not try to blame everyone else (Clinton, poor people, banking acts from the 1970s, etc.) for the problems facing America! Luckily, you cannot fool enough of the people all the time.

Obama, of course, got significant endorsements from many elements of the ruling elite while, of course, appealing to the general population. The latter is unsurprising, given the alternative. The former is equally unsurprising, given the mess the Republicans have significantly helped to create and the fact that the Democratic Party is, for all its quasi-populism, a bosses' party. As in the 1930s, many in the ruling class are seeking ways to save capitalism from its worse excesses. In elite circles, the difficulties in having a regime committed to the rhetoric of "laissez-faire" in the face of economic crisis should be obvious. Having any bailouts and other interventions delayed because of that rhetoric is problematic in the extreme, given the possible depths which the implosion of neo-liberalism could reach – for "socialism" is always on the cards, as long as its primarily for the rich…

In that sense many of the American elite make the same mistake as many on the reformist left. The state acts to defend the interests of the capitalist class as a whole, to keep the system going. That means it needs to be a power above individual companies and individuals and be willing to control them in the wider interests of the system. This task creates the illusion that the state is above classes, that it could be used to further social reform. For those elements in the elite, this fear makes them subscribe to anti-government rhetoric while, of course, seeking government power and influence. Yet just as state action was needed to create capitalism in the first place, so it is required to keep it going. Problems always arise when the ruling elite starts to believe its own rhetoric and the ideological nonsense of economics textbooks about capitalism being self-regulating and stable. At times like this, anti-government rhetoric just gets in the way of a more sensible approach.

So, given the economic context, we can expect an increase in the respectability of Keynesianism at the expense of "laissez-faire" rhetoric. What of popular reform, the social-Keynesianism and popular policies most of Obama's

supporters seek? That depends on what people do now that they have voted. A key element of the anarchist argument against radicals using elections is that it places the focus for change in the hands of the elected representative rather than the people themselves (another, that it de-radicalises the party in question and turns it reformist is not applicable here as the Democrats are a capitalist party). Change is apparently coming, but only when Obama is able to provide it. Yet the nature of that change will depend on the pressures that his government is subject to.

That big business and the Republican smear-machine will be gearing up to ensure their agenda and interests are respected goes without saying. The question is: what will the American people do? Will they return home, waiting for Obama to implement his actually quite vague mandate for change? Or will they use the optimism and hope that his historic win has generated to act for themselves? Will they be able to impose from the streets and workplaces the kind of change which will benefit them? If not, then the hope and joy experienced by many will quickly turn into disappointment, cynicism and apathy. If so, then a genuine alternative to capitalism could be created and anarchists should be at the forefront in advocating the basics of any ***real*** change and ***real*** alternative – direct action, solidarity, mutual aid and social movements rooted in our workplaces and communities. This is not impossible, it happened amazingly quickly in Argentina when its neo-liberal experiment collapsed.

By so doing, we can not only fight for improvements today but also create the possibility of a new world. Ultimately, if the last 30-odd years of stagnating working class income shows, not acting is a guarantee for rising inequality, falling social mobility and soaring insecurities and stress. Change can come, but only if we act to achieve it. Electing Obama is historic for many reasons but real, fundamental, change comes from below. Our task as libertarians is to build the social movements required to turn hope about change into its reality.