

# **Beyond Voting**

**anarchist organizing, electoral politics and developing strategy for liberation**

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Presidential elections are often the terrain on which radicals and anarchists debate the merits of electoral politics. This election season is no different. Social movements around the world and in the United States are declaring Bush's defeat at the ballot box a top priority. As radicals, we have consistently opposed the policies of the Bush administration and have mobilized our opposition repeatedly to the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. We know that the Democratic Party shares the majority of the Republican Party's platform. Both candidates represent ruling class worldviews and institutions of domination. What do we do?

There are many discussions about how to vote out the Bush administration.<sup>1</sup> I want to urge us to step back and talk about electoral politics and larger questions of strategy. For anarchists, voting and electoral politics spark intense debate because they bring fundamental questions to the surface. How do we believe revolutionary transformation happens? How do we build movement? Where does power come from? How do we act in the world? Does our organizing matter? From there we ask more specific questions. How do we as radical organizers, left activists and anarchists relate to elections and electoral politics in general? Are the elections an opportunity for strategic intervention or a waste of time? At the heart of all of these debates is the question of strategy.

Questions of strategy are always on my mind. Where are we going and how are we going to get there? I want to reflect on my personal relationship to electoral politics as an anarchist, because I think the presidential elections often get us debating tactics when really we need to think about strategy. The essay is based in my experience, because the most useful anarchist theory and strategy is often embedded in our practice. It is not a coincidence that the most widely read and cited anarchist text in the US is an autobiography called *Living My Life* by Emma Goldman.

Often I am not even aware of the assumptions and commitments embedded in my practice. I think we need to examine our practice so we can be clear about what our theory and strategy is in order to engage it and develop it. Our theory and strategy is embedded in our practice because we believe that the means lead to the ends, that how we engage in struggle is pre-figurative of the society that we want to live in. For anarchists, direct action is not just a tactic. Direct action is an expression of a deeper understanding of revolutionary transformation in which we take back our power and remake the world. Through direct struggle confronting institutions of injustice, we develop new understandings of ourselves and the world. These understandings help us build communities of empowerment, equality and mutual aid. Through communities of resistance we work to bring down systems of oppression in all their forms. By working to implement our visions of the future society into our everyday lives and in our counter institutions, we seek to build the new world in the shell of the old.

I have often heard the argument that you cannot be an anarchist if you vote or participate in electoral politics. Voting is a tactic. As a tactic I know it is connected to core values about power and decision making, but if we're to develop meaningful strategy all of our tactics need to be evaluated and updated where need be. I'd like to make a distinction about core beliefs and tactics or actions that express core beliefs. For me, anarchism is fundamentally based in a belief in the capacity of people to share power with each other and through relationships, families, organizations, communities and institutions build societies based on having power with people rather than over people. Power with people forms the base of societies organized on principles of

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<sup>1</sup> See *How to Get Stupid White Men Out of Office* edited by Adrienne Maree Brown and William Upski Wimsatt. Also check out <http://www.Indyvoter.org>.

self-determination, cooperation and justice. Many of our tactics have been useful in expressing our core beliefs, but overall we are still far from being a meaningful challenge to the ruling order of domination and exploitation. I want to think about our tactics, strategies and theories not only in terms of how they express our core beliefs, but how they help move us to living our core beliefs. We are largely successful practicing this in groups and communities of dozens. Our tactics, strategies and theories need to deal with societies of millions.

Anarchist analysis of the state has made important contributions to revolutionary theory, particularly in the mid-1800's through the early 1900's.<sup>2</sup> But our theory has remained rooted in the past and today it is often one dimensional and based in a deep mystification of how power actually operates. While proclaiming "smash the state", our analysis leaves little room to figure out how to actually make that happen. Voting and elections will not achieve revolutionary change. But this is not the point as no isolated tactic or campaign will. When our thinking about action is an all or nothing framework of whether this will smash the state or not it often translates into isolation: building countercultures, striking out once in a while and hoping the state will leave us alone. These countercultures are mostly young, white and middle class. This narrow analysis is unable to explain the complex experiences or meet the needs of most people in society. This is why many refer to anarchist *scenes* in the US, not anarchist *movements*, and why these scenes are often referred to as activist ghettos.

In practice, hundreds of self-identified anarchists around the country are already engaged with electoral politics in a variety of ways. I know that thousands of anarchists and anti-authoritarians around the country vote. Even more engage and struggle with the state on issues of welfare, housing, tenants' rights, immigration, childcare, healthcare, prisoner rights, the death penalty, disability rights, education, reproductive freedom, queer rights, civil rights, taxing corporations, affirmative action, the environment, worker rights, US foreign policy and regulating corporate power. But our analysis of this work is rarely discussed in print and is still largely absent from what is considered anarchist theory.<sup>3</sup> If our theory is unable to help us understand and engage the reality of the work we are already doing, then it becomes a barrier to integrating the concrete details of our work into a strategy for revolutionary change.

We need an engaged praxis of theory, action and reflection. We need theory to help us understand the world and inform our strategy. We also need to reflect on our actual practices and the complexities of reality and update our theory.<sup>4</sup> Historically, anarchists have been heavy on action and light on theory. For US anarchists today, life in the heart of empire creates urgency to end injustices committed in our name. This often leads to feeling frantic, and the need to

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<sup>2</sup> Emma Goldman and Lucy Parsons made important arguments about voting and the state during the Women's Suffragist movement. They argued against claims that voting would be the basis for women's equality, citing that the vote had not freed men from the inequality and exploitation of capitalism. See *Anarchism and Other Essays* by Emma Goldman and <http://www.lucyparsonspj.org>.

<sup>3</sup> Anarchist analysis on reform campaigns and electoral politics that were important to my thinking include: "First Pity then Punishment" by Reb H. in *Love and Rage* Vol 8, N2 March/April 1997; "Working Poor Demand Living Wage: the Elusive Fight for Survival Under Capitalism" by Jason Winston in *Love and Rage* Vol8, N4 August/Sept 1997. The Living Wage campaign was particularly influential because it was an a campaign led by anarchists with an explicit commitment to revolutionary movement building. "Fight Against Welfare Cuts Hits the UN" by Laura Schere and Suzy Subways in *Love and Rage* Vol8, N4.

<sup>4</sup> Three important projects dedicated to developing anarchist theory that I'm inspired by are: the Institute for Anarchist Studies, the *New Formulation*: an anti-authoritarian review of books, and book publisher and distributor AK Press.

act often outweighs study and strategic planning. We frequently feel like we're just banging our heads against a wall. When we operate with enormous long-term goals of revolution and liberation without short-term goals to guide us and help us evaluate success, then our culture promotes turnover and burnout. People coming and going is not the issue, people leaving feeling hopeless and jaded is the problem. Additionally, those of us who stay often develop an underlying mentality that only the toughest and brightest can do this work. This mentality can become a dangerous mix of frustration with most people and an unconscious vanguardist sense that we alone are the ones who will make "revolution". I'm interested in strategies that are complex enough to understand mass participation and grounded enough to remember that we are indeed all capable of self-governance.<sup>5</sup>

Gabriel Sayegh, a white queer anti-prison organizer who has taught me much about thinking strategically explained it this way: "If 'we' could more cohesively understand and continue to develop our theory about strategy, 'we' would be stronger and more effective agents for revolutionary change in this country, because 'we' could work towards our vision(s) step by step, and do that within a framework and belief that 'we' can actually win, and make real the world(s) beating deep in our hearts."

Developing strategy is about setting short-term and long-term goals and creating plans to reach them. Strategy is seeing how accomplishing short-term goals helps build our capacities as individuals and organizations in order to be in a better position to work for our long-term goals. Strategy is most useful when based in an engaged praxis of theory, action and reflection.<sup>6</sup> This way it stays grounded in reality, encourages evaluation of outcomes to increase effectiveness and in good case scenarios means being pro-active and visionary rather than reactive and confined to the framework of systems of oppression.

Electoral politics has been only a small part of my overall work, but I'm putting energy into this discussion because I think electoral politics in particular and reform oriented work in general opens up some of the big questions about anarchist strategy. Since 1994, I have voted in over a dozen elections on the local, state and federal level. I have actively participated in electoral campaigns on city and state level ballot initiatives/propositions. I have participated in over 20 community organizing reform oriented campaigns that involved fights at city hall. I have worked to both get rid of candidates and put candidates into office. To be clear, I do not believe that we should unconditionally do electoral work. I believe that we need to be strategic about when and how to be involved. All of the electoral struggles that I have participated in have been community-based struggles with leadership from radical/left organizations and individuals that I felt affinity with. I do electoral work not in spite of my anarchist politics, but because I'm an anarchist committed to building broad movements for social, economic, racial and environmental justice.

One of the most significant aspects of shutting down the WTO in Seattle in 1999 was that anarchist organizing efforts throughout the '90s converged and played a leading role in a mass movement. And during those days of confrontation we believed in ourselves and our power to make change. We looked around and saw ourselves as part of something much larger than our scenes and for many of us, for the first time, we felt confident enough to see ourselves as

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<sup>5</sup> My understanding of strategy and organizing from this framework is heavily influenced by my study of Ella Baker. My essay, "Looking to the Light of Freedom" focuses on her ideas on participatory democracy and group-centered leadership.

<sup>6</sup> Paulo Freire discusses the importance of praxis in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

comrades with tens of thousands of other left, radical, progressive people on the streets. We also found a new kind of respect: a respect that expressed itself most clearly when Elizabeth 'Betita' Martinez wrote "Where Was the Color in Seattle" and called out racism in the mostly white direct action, mostly anarchist movement.<sup>7</sup> I say respect because the essay was truly a gift to the movement and has had an enormously positive impact. I also say respect because the message of the essay to me was: There is much work for us to do together and white activists need to challenge our privilege and develop our analysis and practice so we can all respect each other and work together to build a new world.

I want to emphasize the importance of feeling confident enough to think about vision and strategy. I think the left and radicals in particular have been so beaten down, that we often spend more time fighting each other than actually thinking we can win and what winning would look like. One of the ways that I have seen this confidence manifest is the high level of commitment that thousands of white activists around the country have shown engaging the critiques Martinez put forward. This engagement requires reflection, asking hard questions, willingness to step back and listen, learning from history and developing changes in your personal, organizational and movement theory, strategy and practice.

Throughout the '90s and particularly after Seattle 1999, anarchism has grown in both numbers and influence. What is particularly exciting is the gradual development of a more multigenerational, multiracial, multigendered, multicultural and multiclass anarchist movement. As Anarchist People of Color conferences take place around the country, as immigrant women of color step up their leadership in organizations, as working class anarchists and transgendered/genderqueer people write theory, as parents, children and grandparents help shape activist culture, and as women continue to lead the way, our politics and practice expand. They expand because our politics and practices are an expression of the lives, analysis and visions that we hold and the histories that we bring. Our politics and practices will deepen as they grow to include a vision of collective liberation that genuinely includes all of us and strategies holistic enough to get us there.<sup>8</sup>

Collective liberation refers to the struggles against all systems of oppression with the goal of liberation for all people. With a recognition of the ways that people are simultaneously oppressed and privileged by multiple systems of oppression, the possibility of solidarity between privileged and oppressed people of particular systems of oppression against institutions of power is viewed as strategic. This means exploring the roles of privileged people organizing other privileged people (i.e. men organizing other men, heterosexuals organizing other heterosexuals) to act in solidarity and build with movements of oppressed people to transform power relationships between them in the course of struggling against ruling class power. The leadership of oppressed people in this process is of critical importance along with the development of accountable, anti-oppression/pro-collective liberation leadership of the privileged.<sup>9</sup> From anti-racist struggle of

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<sup>7</sup> This essay is available here. Additionally, the book *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States* by Robert Allen is a useful exploration of how white privilege has undermined movements historically. This provides useful historical context to situate the Global Justice movement and the efforts to challenge white supremacy and white privilege by anti-racist people of color and white people.

<sup>8</sup> Websites representing aspects of the trends that I'm describing are Deadletters, Colours of Resistance, Anarchist People of Colour, and Baby Bloc.

<sup>9</sup> Women of color feminism has been core to my thinking about collective liberation politics. The four books which have articulated these politics most clearly to me are: *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* by Patricia Hill Collins; *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and*

white people joined in the struggle with people of color against white supremacy to men challenging sexism joined with women, transgender/genderqueer people to end patriarchy, heterosexism and the gender binary system, to people in the US fighting imperialism in solidarity with social movements through the world to end US Empire and build self-determination. From this analysis, people in positions of privilege are not acting in solidarity merely because it's the right thing to do. Rather, it is through collective work against these systems that we liberate our collective humanity from the overarching framework of oppressed/privileged/oppressor.

The next two sections are an overview of my experience with anarchist organizing and electoral politics. In my reflections I try to highlight the strategic thinking that guided my actions. Ultimately, I believe at this point in history we need a fusion of anarchist direct action organizing, collective liberation politics and left/radical community organizing is key to developing the kind of movement strategy we need.

## Growing Up with Anarchism in the '90s

I became an anarchist in 1989. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, the centrality of socialism and Marxism on the left was in decline. I embraced anarchist politics and believed that we were a new generation ready to make a new path.<sup>10</sup> I looked to anarchist classics written by Bakunin, Kropotkin and Malatesta for political theory and to the anarchists of Haymarket, Albert and Lucy Parsons in particular, as well as Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman and the anarchists of Spain for political grounding, lessons on practice and overall inspiration.<sup>11</sup>

In high school, a group of us started up the United Anarchist Front in the suburbs of Southern California. and we connected to others through zines and newspapers from around the country. We found the clearest expression of our politics and identity in the newspapers *Profane Existence* and *Love and Rage*. *Profane Existence* popularized activism through news and examples of what other young radicals were doing around the world.<sup>12</sup> *Love and Rage* had an explicit focus on feminism, queer activism, struggles of people of color and indigenous people around the world and in the US, and developing an anarchist analysis of the world today and strategies for movement

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Freedom by Barbara Smith; *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldúa; and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* by bell hooks.

<sup>10</sup> I do think it's important to track the way rightwing anti-communism in the US has influenced anti-communism amongst anarchists. As my friend Jeff Giaquinto points out, to be called a communist in the US has generally meant that you support the rights of workers and believe in equality for people of color, particularly in regards to African Americans. I strongly encourage study of Marx and the Marxist tradition starting with *The Marx-Engels Reader* edited by Robert C. Tucker. And for everyone who has had negative experiences with sectarian left groups to read Max Elbaum's book *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*.

<sup>11</sup> *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* edited by G.P. Maximoff and *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution* by Peter Kropotkin edited by Martin A. Miller were both very instructive. *Malatesta: Life and Ideas* has been critical to my thinking about organizing and anarchism. I highly encourage reading *The Haymarket Tragedy* by Paul Avrich. *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution* by Jose Peirats along with *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women* by Martha A. Ackelsburg were important. A good general overview is *Anarchism* by Daniel Guerin.

<sup>12</sup> An anthology of articles and essays from 1989–1993 was collected into the book *Profane Existence: Making Punk a Threat Again*. These are key texts on US anarchism in the early to mid '90s.

building.<sup>13</sup> Anarchist punk bands like Conflict, Crass and Chumbawamba were the soundtrack to our resistance, educating us and giving us energy as they gave voice to our anger and passion. We threw our energies into building a youth-based, punk-influenced resistance counterculture.

When elections came around, I used to love to put on my “If voting changed anything it would be illegal” button. I wore it eagerly anticipating debate, hoping someone would ask, “*What does that mean?*” Voting is the illusion of choice between two masters who serve the interests of capital at the expense of the majority of humanity and the earth. “*But voting is our voice in how society operates.*” Voting is the lie of democratic participation in your own subjugation. Our voice is expressed everyday when we resist injustice and build alternatives based in our commitment to mutual aid, cooperation and real decision-making power over our lives. And then the statement that I was just waiting for: “*If you don’t vote, then you have no right to complain about what the government does.*” Your vote reinforces the power of an unjust system that robs us of our power and dignity and then to add insult to injury, you give it the appearance of consent through your participation in the electoral process.

I saw these debates as opportunity to win the anarchist position and hopefully convert others. My general orientation focused on the need to build an explicitly anarchist movement to fight capitalism and the state. The questions of “how revolutionary transformation happens” or “how we move from this society to the society we want” were not on my mind. Not because I dismissed the questions, but because I wasn’t at a point of knowing how or why to ask them. Like the anarchists and radicals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that I studied and admired, I believed in my heart that revolution was coming, that it was inevitable, and that we needed to get more and more people ready for it. I grew up a white, middle class, male, with loving and supportive parents and access to healthcare, resourced public school, healthy food and excellent housing. My anarchism was sparked and guided by my working class best friend who grew up with his over-worked, under-supported single mom. He could articulate a long list of what was wrong with capitalism and the need for a society that treated people with dignity and respect.

Our strategy, as expressed by what we ended up doing as opposed to an articulated plan, was to get as many people into anarchism, fight back with other anarchists in what ever way we could (which primarily meant propaganda) and build loving community with our friends along the way. We were coming from a belief that basically people just needed to wake up, that people were brainwashed into submission and that once they knew the truth, the people of the world would get off their knees and the system would automatically come crashing down.

The Gulf War in 1991 had a profound impact on us. We found ourselves in the streets with thousands and for the first time it began to click that what we were up against was not just an isolated elite with power and wealth, but a complex system of inter-locking institutions like the media, military.<sup>14</sup> In following years I was challenged on my own sexism and racism by comrades and close friends. It has been a challenging and profound process of coming to understand that society is composed of complex relationships shaped by white supremacy, patriarchy and other

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<sup>13</sup> An anthology of essays from Love and Rage in the later years, documents from the internal debates when the Federation ended, and the critical summation of Love and Rage, “After Winter Must Come Spring.” A New World in Our Hearts edited by Roy San Filippo.

<sup>14</sup> One of the primary editors of Profane Existence, Dan, has explained, “It took the Gulf War to stop us from just reporting the news to get us off our asses and make some. ...since then we have maintained the direct connection, turning our words on paper into direct action that affect the world around us.”



systems of oppression.<sup>15</sup> This helped me to put capitalism and the state into a broader framework and history. It was critical to my development to believe that power was not just out there, but that I experience and participate in it. Now I had to figure out how the experience shaped me and what my participation meant. It was becoming clear that revolution was far more complicated and far from imminent. We needed to get better organized.

In the '90s, around the country, anarchists were strengthening or creating housing collectives, worker co-ops, social centers, infoshops, micro-powered radio stations and other alternative institutions. Anarchists who had utilized affinity groups, consensus decision making, spokescouncils and creative direct action in the anti-nuke movement of the 80's helped bring these organizational forms and action strategies into the newer movements.<sup>16</sup> Anarchists built organizations like Food Not Bombs, Lesbian Avengers, Industrial Workers of the World, Earth First!, Anti-Racist Action, Riot Grrrl, Anarchist Black Cross and hundreds of local collectives running projects including women's health, needle exchange, literature distribution, community gardens, queer youth outreach, bicycle, book and tool libraries, and tenant and prisoner support.<sup>17</sup>

Anarchists continued putting out hundreds of zines and newspapers and were among the first to turn the internet into an important communication tool. Anarchists were heavily involved in solidarity work for Mumia Abu-Jamal and political prisoners, indigenous struggles in the western hemisphere and the Zapatistas in particular. Through conferences and gatherings like Sister Subverter and Earth First! Round River Rendezvous, we came together to share experiences, learn skills and build our relationships with one another. In 1996, Active Resistance in Chicago took it to a new level and ran a week of workshops focused explicitly on community organizing, workplace organizing and direct action activism that lead up to protests at the Democratic National Convention.

Throughout this time period, I spent most of my time working with other anarchists to build a large, effective, well networked, anarchist movement that was capable of taking action, providing community services and building alternative institutions. I moved to San Francisco and immersed myself in Food Not Bombs. Our general strategy was to develop alternative institutions based on cooperation and mutual aid. They would help provide support for communities of resistances that could strike at systems of oppression through direct action, mobilizations (rallies and marches), civil disobedience. Cultural and social events and general education work would bring people into the movement and build support for our activities.

As the movement was growing in size, more of the anarchists I worked with named women of color feminism, queer theory and activism, and liberation struggles in communities of color as their political influences and sources of inspiration. In addition to anarchist classics, influences included contemporary radical intellectuals, poets and political novelists such as bell hooks, Marge Piercy, Adrienne Rich, Howard Zinn, Edward Said, Barbara Smith, Noam Chomsky, Malcolm X, Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Ursula K. LeGuin, Angela Davis and Alice Walker.

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<sup>15</sup> Two essays that explore this further are: "Forging a Movement on Shifting Ground": reflections on anti-racism as a catalyst for global justice organizing" and "Going To Places That Scare Me: Personal Reflections On Challenging Male Supremacy."

<sup>16</sup> An important history of anarchism and direct action leading into the '90s is Barbara Epstein's Political Protest & Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>17</sup> To put this into perspective, there were 12 Food Not Bombs groups in 1992 and over 250 groups formed around the world by the end of the '90s, with the majority of them in the US. See <http://fnbnews.org>.

In addition to fighting systems of oppression in the world, a growing commitment was developing to fight the impacts of systems of oppression on our own lives and in our organizing. This commitment was building through the struggle primarily of women, queers, working class people and people of color to openly discuss issues of race, class, gender, sexuality and age in our organizations and projects. Molly Tov's widely distributed "Message To Anarchist Men and then some," and the anonymous "What It Is To Be A Girl In An Anarchist Boys Club" among dozens of other writings by women, called out sexism in the movement.<sup>18</sup> Former Civil Rights organizer and Black Panther Lorenzo Komboa Ervin's influential book "Anarchism and the Black Revolution" challenged white privilege and put the question of leadership from oppressed communities, particularly communities of color, into movement discussion.<sup>19</sup>

Through working in collectives and reading movement history, revolutionary theory, and current analysis in the movement, I began to understand revolutionary transformation as a process that combines ideas, action and reflection. Through struggle in society we transform ourselves as individuals in the process. It requires organizations and projects based in anarchist politics that can help agitate for revolutionary change and offer alternatives people can join. The base of power for revolutionary change is everyday people who will rise up against some last straw in a multitude of injustices and when they do, we will be there to join in and support their initiative. Through struggles and victories, and the relationships and communities developed in the process, people develop a sense of empowerment. The anti-hierarchical, egalitarian or horizontal organizing models of anarchism facilitate as many people as possible sharing leadership roles, power and decision making. Through these experiences we learn to share power and develop a stronger base of active resistance to continue the struggle when this particular surge or uprising calms.

The empowered imaginations and passions of everyday people develop affinity with radical ideas and some of them join revolutionary organizations. These organizations are a base for continued collective action and help form communities of support with other left/radical formations. Through these activities our visions of what is possible and the concrete details of the new society will advance alongside our own capacities to make social change. This continues to reflect a large part of my thinking. However, I knew this was not enough. Throughout the 90's I was committed to primarily working with other anarchists. Nevertheless, I worked in coalitions and alliances with a broad range of left/radical activists. Looking back at my experience growing up in California, right-wing ballot measures and the struggles to defeat them serve as important markers in my development.

## **Growing Up Fighting the Right in California**

California is one of the most powerful states in the US. Outside of the slave economy based in the South, capitalists in California were a leading force in combining white supremacy and capitalism. California was colonized by the US government in the 1840's in a war against Mexico. Over 100,000 people were crossed by the US border in the process. The US war helped to fulfill the empire building plan of Manifest Destiny. California is now the 5<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world and the most populous state in the US.

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<sup>18</sup> These writings and others are available here.

<sup>19</sup> Lorenzo Komboa Ervin's and many other writings by anarchists of color are available here.

Over the past 150 years, capitalists have fought for and won key anti-immigration policies in California. Capitalists pitted white workers against even more underpaid, overworked Chinese workers. White labor unions – using a strategy of protecting white workers’ rights only – organized to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act. Passed in 1882, it was the first significant law restricting immigration in the US. It became the basis for later attacks on immigrant communities. Chinese people were denied citizenship and the rights of citizenship until 1943. A similar cycle took place later with Japanese workers, particularly when Japanese workers organized unions and carried out successful strikes. In 1924, the US Congress passed legislation to build border patrols on the US/Mexico border. Immigration policy and border patrols expressing the logic of capitalism and white supremacy imposed the construct “illegal” to hundreds of thousands, and eventually millions, of people already exploited as workers. Colonized indigenous land and exploited immigrant labor was the base from which the California economy was built.

This is the history that I was born into in Anaheim, California in 1973. I went to school in the multiracial, majority white, public schools. In 1986, California became the 8<sup>th</sup> State in the US to declare English as the official language under the rallying cry, “English Only” (28 states have similar laws as of 2004). I remember in elementary school thinking any brown skinned person who couldn’t speak English was inferior. My grandfather and other relatives regularly spoke of “those lazy, good for nothin’ Mexicans stealing our tax dollars”. Even as an activist in high school who often complained about apathy amongst other students, I never made the connection to the Latinos/as who were calling out racism on campus, because the critiques they raised about language and culture were totally outside what I considered relevant issues.

The Rodney King Verdict and mass uprising in Los Angeles had a profound influence on me.<sup>20</sup> With the encouragement and support of friends of color, race become more and more central to my analysis. At Fullerton College in Orange County I quickly got involved with a multiracial, Chicano/a led, coalition fighting against statewide tuition increases. The Coalition made connections between the enormously expanding prison budget and the slashed education budget, and argued that college must serve working class students and students of color. The coalition was widely supported by students of color and white students. Then the ads began to appear in school newspapers around Southern California: “Your fees are going up because illegal aliens are taking advantage of our tax dollars.” This was followed several months later with Proposition 187, also known as Save Our State (SOS), a ballot measure for the 1994 election which was to prohibit undocumented immigrants from having access to public healthcare, education or any social service. The official wording on the ballot described itself as “the first giant stride in ultimately ending the illegal alien invasion.”

Over the preceding few months I had been building tight political bonds and friendships with Latina/o organizers, in particular David Rojas who was an organizing mentor for me. David played a leading role in forming and guiding the coalition. He spent many hours talking politics, helping me develop an understanding of white supremacy and colonialism.<sup>21</sup> When the ads hit and it was clear that this was part of growing anti-immigrant campaign with enormous support in white communities, it took everything to a level I had never known before. I had read about the roundups of anarchists, of the Red Scares’ persecution of radicals and I claimed it all as my

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<sup>20</sup> I finished reading W.E.B. DuBois *The Souls of Black Folk* the day the verdict was announced. It, along with *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, was critical to read. In developing a deeper understanding of the Black Liberation struggle throughout US history, Vincent Harding’s *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom* was very helpful.

<sup>21</sup> “Towards Anti-Racist Politics and Practice: a racial autobiography.”

history. But Prop 187 was an attack on a whole category of people based on race and language, regardless of any chosen political identity. This was an attack on entire families, communities and generations – and it was both deeply historic and institutional. This was an effort to permanently and systematically deny basic human rights of healthcare and education to oppressed and exploited communities. As David and I continued working side by side, I could feel for the first time the way that history was written on our skin. He and I agreed in our analysis and stood together in our organizing, but we experienced the anti-immigrant racist climate in such dramatically different ways because of who we were. I felt the fear of violent reprisal for being associated with him, he felt it because it was designed for him, his family and community.

Marching in the streets with hundreds and thousands against Prop 187 was a challenge to my whole understanding of voting. This was not about voting for a master, nor was this a movement of people deceived by the illusion of choice. This was a movement of youth, parents, grandparents, workers, farmers, students, teachers and young children in the arms of their parents moving in the streets saying: “We are fully human”, “We stand together in solidarity with other oppressed people to say no to this system that is killing our communities”. It was the first time that I felt like I wasn’t rejecting my community, but fighting in solidarity with a community of millions for self-determination. It was the first time that I had participated in a multigenerational community that spoke to a clear memory and history of resistance against oppression and a legacy of struggle for liberation.

There was no question in my mind that we needed to defeat this measure and that voting was a tactic to use because this manifestation of state oppression was being fought for in the electoral arena. It’s important to note that elections are widely interpreted as the clearest expressions of what broad numbers of people believe politically. While radicals are quick to note that the majority of people don’t vote, the pre-election corporate media spins and the actual poll results have an enormous impact on the broader political climate.<sup>22</sup> For example, if Prop 187 was going to pass, the difference between it passing by 51% or 60% is huge. In a real way, votes represent belief systems and political commitment. The right has been extremely effective at arguing the “will of the voters” to advance their agenda. If Prop 187 wins by 10 or more percentage points then it signals a base of support for even more rightwing measures and candidates. It also sets a tone for what corporations and politicians think they can get away with and build support for. If 70% vote for Prop 187 it decreases the fear the Border Patrol has about killing immigrants. It also signals to capitalists a lack of support for immigrants to organize unions and fight for dignity. The right-wing has understood that increasing anti-immigrant sentiment by 2 or 3 percentage points year after year ends not just in huge victory for them 10 years down the line, but steadily increases a political climate that favors profit for some people over the lives of most people.<sup>23</sup>

This is why Rahula Janowski, a mother, a member of the Heads Up Collective, and a long time anarchist, believes that voting is a form of harm reduction. “For me, voting isn’t the path to my ideal future society. I vote because I feel a sense of responsibility to act in the real world around me. When rich neo-liberals running for office are building their power scapegoating poor and homeless people, I think we need to take action. I’ve participated in local elections for candidates

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<sup>22</sup> Anarchists and radicals who believe voting is meaningless frequently express depression because so many people voted a particular way. At the very least the way people vote seems to have a meaningful impact on how we see the world around us.

<sup>23</sup> Sara Diamond’s book *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* is very useful.

not because I thought they'd make things a lot better, but because I wanted to stop things from getting much worse in the short term."

Plans to achieve short-term goals with an overarching plan to achieve long-term goals are the basis for strategy. It is not the vote in and of itself that is the goal, but moving people to the belief system and political commitment represented by the vote. The work of moving people to particular positions, mobilizing support for particular positions and turning people out on election day presents a clear structure to do mass political education and outreach with a clear next step that every individual is given. In many cases, to turn my back on electoral politics would be turning my back on the most pressing struggles of the day.

Jeff Giaquinto a San Francisco Food Not Bombs member of many years expresses this more bluntly, "Electoral politics suck. We frequently lose. Even when we win, people in the government are quick to water down or turn over our victories. I do it because the material impact of state policy is enormous and the vote does influence the political reality of what politicians believe they can get away with, both good and bad. Often it's about stopping policy from getting worse so we can have more space to organize for something better."

What is critical to understand is that we're not just fighting for votes, but for left/radical politics. If you can build a majority that favors both worker rights and immigrant rights, then Prop 187 not only loses, but there is far more power to build immigrant labor unions with broad community support. At this point, rather than argue with someone against voting when they are likely looking for some way to make their opinions heard, I encourage people to express their opinions through voting and then tried to connect their own desire to impact the world to broader political commitments like activism and community struggles. My goal is no longer to win an argument in those conversations. My goal is to build movements that win.

Prop 187 passed with 59% of the vote. The struggle against it galvanized many young people of color, particularly Chicanas/os to fight back even harder. This was just one more attack on their communities as well as one more opportunity to strengthen collective power to survive and deepen the struggle.<sup>24</sup>

Over the next six years the rightwing scored an impressive array of victories at the ballot box. Using propositions they attacked affirmative action, bilingual education "English Only", youth of color and queer marriage. In all of these struggles community and activist organizations fought back. I marched in the streets with thousands of other people, as did many other anarchists. In these struggles I met very few people who had the illusion that this was the primary site of resistance. Overwhelmingly, I met people who were involved in a wide range of activities and projects in their communities. Many of them had clear analysis that these electoral fights were part of a larger struggle. To ask them why they were in these fights missed the point that oppressed communities are under attack and do not always get to choose which issues to prioritize. The logic is clear: if popular right wing forces are mobilizing mostly white voters to deny your community basic services, make it easier to lock your kids up, and outlaw your language in the classroom, then the matter is far more than just a vote or one election. Yet even as many anarchists understood this and participated in these struggles, the dominant message remained "Anarchists do not vote, do not engage in electoral politics." Given that the majority of

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<sup>24</sup> De Colores Means All of Us: Latina Views for a Multi-Colored Century by Elizabeth 'Betita' Martinez has several essays that focus on alliance building, youth leadership and movement building during these political struggles.

anarchists are white and come from the white communities that are voting against communities of color, the dismissal of electoral politics becomes even more problematic.

I remember talking with a progressive/left, white, queer schoolteacher in San Francisco. She said that she had a really hard time trusting me because I was an anarchist. She said, “I agree with a lot of what I understand anarchism to be, but I don’t trust anarchists. Every time powerful forces come after oppressed communities with all of these propositions, all the anarchists I talk with say they don’t believe in legitimizing the power of the state because they won’t get their hands dirty in electoral politics.”

“Don’t you understand that the state has real power over people’s lives? This is not a game that you get to choose to play in or not. While you might have the privilege to stand there ‘more radical than thou’, most of us are fighting for our lives. Being ‘above it all’ is not a choice. Then you complain about the cops arresting you at a civil disobedience and call on my solidarity? I provide that solidarity because I hope one day you’ll all wake up to what we’re really up against.”

While this was one of the most direct critiques I’ve heard about anarchists and voting, I’ve seen many express similar sentiments. I agree that voting can have the effect of legitimizing the state. I agree that questioning representative democracy in a capitalist society and questioning the role of voting in social change have all been positive contributions to revolutionary thought. However, I believe that our politics of non-engagement in so many crucial struggles involving the state, electoral politics among them, have in the end done more to de-legitimize anarchists than to de-legitimize the power of the state. Furthermore, I have worked with community-based struggles that have both turned out the vote and attacked the legitimacy of the state. I know that we are smart enough and creative enough to vote, participate in electoral politics when it is strategic and advance a radical systemic analysis. Beyond that, I also believe that white radicals have enormous potential to move from rebel outsiders to radical leaders in the kinds of white communities many of us grew up in.

## **Gathering Lessons and Finding Connections**

I learned a lot from working in community-based electoral struggles. The orientation of the people I was learning from was generally based in radical community organizing models. From this orientation, broadly speaking, these electoral battles are part of long-term struggle against oppression and for self-determination and liberation. We can utilize these fights to engage in mass education, argue for our positions, and build the power of oppressed communities to fight back and develop alliances with other oppressed communities.

Through internal political education, skills building and reflection on our work we can develop the analysis and capacity of activists and organizers. And in every situation, we must set our own short-term goals of what victory in the campaign is so that we can be constantly moving forward with our long-term goals, even as we fight these attacks and even if we lose them.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Two books that cover a solid grassroots organizing framework: *Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Workers Take on the Global Economy* by Miriam Ching Yoon Louie and the *MidWest Academy Manual for Activists Organizing for Social Change*. *Sweatshop Warriors* gives an understanding of organizing and movement building and *Organizing for Social Change* is a how-to manual.

In his groundbreaking essay “Active Revolution”, James Mumm explores the fusion between anarchist politics and community organizing. In discussing strategy he emphasizes the difference between activism and organizing.

“Activism’s power is derived first from its ability to affect change on issues and secondly on the potential force for change embodied in organized people. Organizing uses power differently – by first building an organization. For organizers, issues are a means to an end (the development of peoples’ capacity to affect change). Organizers’ use of power with others to alter the relations of power over others inherent in government or capitalist corporations forces such authoritarian groups into a debilitating contradiction. Opening such contradictions creates room for change. Authoritarian institutions may well react with violence to preserve power over others, or these contradictions may result in real social change. Liberation and revolution take place as relationships change from authoritarian to egalitarian.”

In short, the goal of activism is to win issues and the goal of organizing is to develop people’s capacity to effect change. Mumm’s writings on these topics are key.<sup>26</sup>

My orientation doing community-based electoral work has been to help make connections between anarchists and these struggles. Anarchists can learn a lot from working with community organizing models and I believe we have valuable organizing experience and analysis to bring to the table as well.<sup>27</sup>

The most educational and inspiring experience I’ve had working on a campaign that included electoral politics was during the height of gentrification in the Mission District of San Francisco. Enormous amounts of capital were being invested in dot-com startups that led to a dramatic rise in evictions of long time Mission District residents, mostly working class and people of color. It also led to enormous rent increases. As a white middle class, alternative youth, I participated in the early cycle of gentrification. I moved into this predominantly working class, Latino/a neighborhood. Just being there at all made it more appealing to other white people to move in. While I went to the radical countercultural spaces run by and for activists and artists, this opened the way to more expensive stores catering to apolitical young people who came after me.

Gentrification is part of capitalism and white supremacy generally shapes the process by which it happens. I felt a sense of responsibility to engage in and support resistance efforts led by working class people and people of color in the neighborhood. Questioning my personal role in the process of gentrification was important, and I found that I understood my role more clearly through participation in the anti-gentrification struggle.

In 2000, with landlords, developers, and rich capitalists celebrating and profiting from the dislocation of working families, communities of color and low-income tenants, the Mission Anti-Displacement Coalition emerged. MAC was a collaboration between many of the most dynamic community organizations in the Mission fighting to build worker and tenant power, and fighting for environmental, racial and economic justice.

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<sup>26</sup> “Active Revolution” by James Mumm.

<sup>27</sup> The influence of my study of the Civil Rights movement in general, and the community organizing models of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and Ella Baker in particular, has been monumental. I strongly encourage people to read (I suggest in this order for flow): *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* by David Garrow; *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* by Clayborne Carson; *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*; *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers 1941–1965* edited by Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods. Ms. Baker is a role model in fusion politics and practice whom I look to for guidance and inspiration.

MAC was a multiracial, majority Latino/a, majority working class, left/radical led coalition. MAC used a multi-faceted campaign strategy that used direct action, electoral politics, community mobilizations, political education. The campaign had an immediate goal of halting gentrification and explicitly combined that with a long-term goal of popular control by communities over the decisions impacting them.<sup>28</sup>

Clare Bayard, a long-time Food Not Bombs member at that time, anarchist organizer and member of Anti-Racism for Global Justice, has been key to my own thinking and participation in electoral politics. She explains her experience with MAC:

“MAC speak-outs, neighborhood forums, and community planning process meetings were the first spaces I’d seen that represented real self-determination in action on a community level, focused on housing/zoning (which, in real ways, is about neighborhood control). The community-based organizations in leadership built structures to intentionally bring together families, tenants, people facing eviction, for concrete political education and action. Direct actions including occupations and lockdowns targeted not only city hall, but also the planning department, landlords and real estate agencies specializing in evictions, illegal dot-com offices, and tenant evictions. MAC utilized city elections to focus and build larger campaigns around shifting control from city hall to a neighborhood level, a political goal I held in theory but had never seen anyone even realistically attempt. While mobilizing around legislation on the ballot, MAC also supported a slate of progressive candidates for the Board of Supervisors. For me, it was easier at that time to get behind fights for housing propositions than to be involved in a candidacy. But through my involvement in the coalition, I saw how work around a candidate could be successfully framed entirely around issues, making the vote a referendum both on city politics and about which residents of San Francisco matter; that working class communities and communities of color have a voice and have political power in this city. The timeline and built-in structures around electoral campaigns provided a space for a much more progressive line to be expressed than I had imagined possible. The politically experienced leadership in MAC didn’t suffer from the illusions that everything would be solved by electing particular people, just as they knew it would take more than just the education piece in order to successfully mobilize a neighborhood in its defense. After the elections, in which we registered notable successes, MAC held a rally to both celebrate our victories and also to remind the newly elected supervisors about who they would need to be accountable to.”

Anarchists were involved in leadership and played active roles in MAC. I’ve often thought that the role of anarchists in coalitions is to support the most radical politics and argue for democratic decision making structures. There have been times when this is true, mostly when working in coalitions dominated by sectarian left organizations. However, with MAC and in many of the community-based struggles that I have worked in, I was learning lessons in organizing.

Some anarchists said that it was disappointing that there was not an explicitly anarchist anti-gentrification formation. I think being involved with MAC was the best move politically and strategically. I think it was monumental to have anarchists participate in, learn from and support the leadership of left/radical Latina/o and working class based community groups. I also think that there is an important void to be filled by pro-community organizing, non-sectarian,

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<sup>28</sup> Two useful documents from that time period and struggle: Anarchist and community activist Tom Wetzel’s essay “A Year in the Life of the Anti-Displacement Movement” does a good job of documenting the anti-gentrification organizing happening; Whispered Media, a collective of video activists coming out of Earth First! and the global justice movement, produced the documentary BOOM: the Sound of Eviction about this struggle.



pro-movement building anarchists with anti-racist/anti-oppression politics to form organizations that can be part of a coalition effort like MAC. I think that when broader left/radical forces come together there is an enormous opportunity for us to share and learn politics and organizing that can take all of our work to the next level.

I'm an anarchist who has always believed that there is much to learn from many political traditions and perspectives. As I work to build broader movement, I remain an anarchist because I think we have made and continue to make important contributions in developing effective, holistic strategy. Nisha Anand, who works at San Francisco Women Against Rape, is also committed to broader left movement building. She explains, "I believe the successful collective models anarchists have developed can and should be applied to a larger context and with diverse communities. In order for this to work, we as anarchists must first develop long-term strategies that build relationships and trust. Meeting people where they're at and working on issues that have real impact in communities we want to work with is a key way to begin building such relationships. Initially, our work may include broad coalition organizing, support and solidarity work, and electoral mobilizations."

Meeting people "where they're at" is key to why I think electoral politics can at times be both necessary and strategic. In the case of fighting gentrification with MAC, I think it was necessary because this fight and many other fights must be fought and to stand on the sidelines makes one irrelevant. Necessary because this fight, like others, was about people's basic human rights to live and raise children in their neighborhood. Necessary because not fighting it means we are in a far weaker position to fight anything else. Strategic because this was a fight that was affecting broad numbers of people and spoke to core issues/values of what kind of community/society we want to live in. Strategic because through popular struggles new possibilities open up, spaces to practice radical organizing and learn crucial lessons. Strategic because relationships of respect, trust and accountability are built much more quickly in the course of day-to-day struggle. Strategic because relationships with a broader range of left/radical people can help form stronger alliances based on respect, solidarity and affinity.

I want to be clear that electoral politics is but a small part of a much larger strategy. Anarchist tenant organizer Ingrid Chapman underlines this point, "When organizing around propositions we must look past the elections, because the reality of the system is that the wealthy rightwing has a clear advantage, and hard-fought progressive laws can be –and often are–overturned or tremendously weakened. We must always be thinking about how and what we are building for post-election day. Not just getting folk out to vote, but where does that community power go after the election? How can this campaign build long lasting relationships, build skills and build a base of people who are empowered and organized to continue the fight for justice – win or lose? And when we win or lose, what tactics can we use outside the electoral system and formal politics to empower folk and keep fighting? Because one of our major struggles is fighting against disempowerment all around us."

So, what are we going to do about this presidential election?

## **Beyond Bush, Against Imperialism**

The focus of my argument about electoral politics has been elections on the local and state level. Getting the Bush administration out of the White House is not my primary goal, but nevertheless,

it is a goal. Gabriel Sayegh has contributed an important essay “Tear down the prison, get out the vote: an antiracist argument for voting” which presents a strong argument to white radicals to vote against Bush.

He writes: “If white activists continue along the line of ‘there’s no different between the candidates so I won’t vote’ then we miss the very important ways that the candidates do differ, and how those differences can be leveraged in an effort to build a stronger movement. While Bush and Kerry are certain to serve many of the same corporate masters, there are everyday material realities which, however small they may seem to upper and middle class white people, are indeed enormously significant to those who aren’t white or aren’t middle/upper class. For instance, Bush’s first act in offices was to place a global gag rule on reproductive rights and abortion clinics around the world, effectively undermining the right to family planning services to women around the globe. And who are those women? Poor women of color.”

“That doesn’t mean the Democrats are the answer to Bush or the Republicans. It means –not so simply– that white activists need to be politically savvy enough to understand how those little, narrow nuances that separate the candidates and political parties are not so little and narrow to everyone. For millions of poor people–most of them people of color– that dime’s worth of difference between Republican and Democrat can mean life or death.”

How can we use these differences to weaken both party’s positions and strengthen ours? For example, the imperialism of the Bush administration favors unilateralism and military force and this is generally opposed by Democrats who under the Clinton administration preferred the imperialism of international trade agreements, diplomacy and more structural state violence like sanctions. How can we move the slogans from focusing on a person to a system: from “Anyone but Bush” to “Everyone Against Empire”. If we can bring an anti-imperialist/anti-empire politics into the growing frustration with the US war on Iraq, it can open doors to broader politic engagement against the imperialist agenda of both parties.

It’s also important to focus on how we can build our organizations in this election fight so we are in a better position to move forward with our goals, regardless of who is president. I’m confident we can use the anti-Bush campaign to build our movement. Sayegh’s essay offers concrete strategic suggestions for action, like anarchists talking with people who can’t vote (prisoners, people with felonies or undocumented immigrants) and offering to vote for them. Sayegh’s essay joins a larger discussion on electoral strategy already initiated by the book, “How to Get Stupid White Men Out of Office: the anti-politics, unboring guide to power”. Edited by Adrienne Maree Brown and William Upski Wimsatt, it is a compilation of stories about radical activists engaging with electoral politics with a long-term strategic focus on movement building. They started the League of Pissed Off Voters at [Indyvoter.org](http://Indyvoter.org). [Punkvoter.com](http://Punkvoter.com) is another project organizing left/radical/alternative younger people to defeat Bush and get active. [Righttovote.org](http://Righttovote.org) is organizing to end disenfranchisement of people convicted with felonies. The organizing is happening. Developing strategy doesn’t mean figuring out how we’re all going to do the same work with the same goals. Strategy can help us see the ways that a multitude of different groups, projects, campaigns and communities can strengthen and advance all of our work.

It’s important that we approach this election just as any other struggle; develop goals for yourself and/or with the groups you work with so that you set your own terms for what success is. My primary goal continues to be the development of a broad-based, radical/left, anti-racist, feminist, anti-capitalist movement led by people of color, women, queer, transgendered/genderqueer and working class people. I believe that the combination of collective liberation politics, community-

based organizing strategies of building power, and direct action strategies of expressing and sharing power will help us create a fusion of radical analysis and practice to get us beyond the question of who we're voting for and get on with building the worlds that live in our hearts.

*Much love to the editorial crew on this essay: Nisha Anand, Clare Bayard, Dan Berger, Ingrid Chapman, Chris Dixon, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Jeff Giaquinto, Rahula Janowski, Sharon Martinas, Gabriel Sayegh and Josh Warren-White.*

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