

Why I don't vote

I don't vote. I have never taken part in an election and I never will. To many, the idea that someone who actually cares about what is happening in the world would refuse to vote seems incredible. The common sense of the democratic state tells us that voting is the way that we can change things and that those who don't vote are apathetic. It has even been said that those who do not vote shouldn't complain.

But common sense often hides a great many unquestioned assumptions. This is certainly true with regard to the commonplaces about democracy and voting. I hope that by explaining why I don't vote, I will expose some of these assumptions and raise a few questions.

If my refusal to vote sprang from apathy, obviously I wouldn't take the time to write this. In fact my refusal to vote stems from a desire to live in a certain way, a way that requires a radical change in the social structure of

our lives and the world. As far as possible, I try to confront the world in which we live in terms of these desires, acting toward their realization.

Put briefly, I want to live in a world in which I can be the creator of my life, acting in free association with others with whom I feel some kinship and whose presence I enjoy in order to make our lives together on our own terms. The existing social order consists of a global network of institutions that stands in the way of the realization of this desire. This network includes economic institutions, not just the corporations as such, but also the entire system of economic exchange, private and state property, and wage labor – the institutions of capitalism. It also includes government, law, the police, the military and the social bureaucracy – the institutions of the state. These institutions define the conditions of our social life, forcing us into roles that uphold and reproduce the institutional order. My desire to create my life on my own terms places me in rebellion against these institutions. If I find others with a similar desire and we join together in collective struggle for its realization, that is potentially revolutionary.

In order for the ruling institutions to exist at all, they have to take away our capacity to create our lives for ourselves. They do so precisely by directing our energy into activity that reproduces the institutions, and selling some of the product of this activity back to us. This theft of our life's energy means that the social order and those who hold power in it are *objectively* our enemies, because they have made themselves our masters. This is why class struggle is an inevitable part of this social order. But *sub-*

jectively, we become the enemies of this society when we decide to take our lives back as our own and begin to act on our decision.

Having made this decision, what would voting mean to me? First of all, let's consider the kinds of choices that appear on the ballot. All of these choices can be reduced to two questions: 1) who do we want to rule us? and 2) with what rules do we want to be ruled? These questions themselves already assume that we should not or cannot be the creators of our own lives, that we should give our ability to decide and act over to others who will determine the conditions of our lives (or uphold those long since determined by the global social order) on the basis of pre-existing rules. But a ballot doesn't even present these two questions in an open way that allows the voter to choose freely. This would be impossible since election officials couldn't possibly manage to go through a series of essays in which people described what they wanted even within the limited framework of these questions. So instead we are given a few candidates to choose between for the various elected offices – individuals who want to exercise power over other people, whether for “the common good” or out of crass self-interest –and ballot measures on which to vote yes or no. The candidates and ballot measures are presented to us by professional politicians, people who have the time and money to determine the questions that they are willing to let us vote on. None of this will ever call the ruling order into question, since the electoral process itself assumes the necessity of this order.

So voting is nothing more than choosing which of the masters among the few on the ballot that the voter would prefer to be ruled by and deciding which of the potential rules presented on the ballot for managing this master/slave relationship s/he would like to see them use. Since the democratic process is based on majority rule (with a few notable exceptions, such as the use of the electoral college to choose the president), one's individual "choices" will not, in fact, determine what sort of servitude s/he will experience. Instead, the "choices" of the majority (as determined by election officials) will determine this for everyone.

In short, voting is not taking action, nor is it taking responsibility for one's life. It is the very opposite of this. When people vote, they are saying that they accept the idea that others should determine the conditions of their life and their world. They are saying that others should determine the limits of the choices that they make, preferably simplifying these choices into mere either/or decisions, quickly dealt with by a simple momentary gesture. They are saying that they would leave the responsibility of taking decisive action to others. In other words, those who vote are saying that they are content to leave their lives in the hands of others, to refuse the responsibility of creating the life they desire, to avoid the task of finding ways to directly make decisions and take action with others of their choosing that could lead to a real transformation of social reality. So every voter would do well to ask themselves if this is what they mean to say.

I want to make my life my own. I want to find others with whom to create ways to freely act together to directly determine the conditions of our lives on our own terms, without rulers or institutional structures defining our activity. In other words, I want to live in a world without masters or slaves. Therefore, I do not vote. Such desires could never fit in a ballot box. Instead I do my best to create my life in revolt against the ruling order. I talk with others around me about our lives and about what is happening in the world in order to find a few accomplices in the crime called freedom. And I act, alone when necessary and with others when possible, towards the realization of the life and world I desire and against the ruling order and the misery it imposes on life everywhere.

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