

Lever Pulling/Push Button Democracy

By: Jacino Hamilton

Several months into the 2016 U.S. presidential race, I am still trying to sort out my impressions of the dominate narrative, "the year of the outsider," or what to make of Bernie Sanders, a self-described Democratic-Socialist, and Donald Trump, whose campaign for the Republican presidential nomination has created a sounding board for extreme racist ideas.

For many the 2016 presidential election is an opportunity to express anger and frustration with Washington politics as usual. Where the quid pro quo system of pay-to-play politics is leaving everyone behind with the exception of the rich and super rich. I do find it ironic that a professional politician and a billionaire are leading the charge for change instead of a grassroots movement taking the lead. There is something ludicrous about this. Still, the shift toward the extreme wings of both parties offer an important opportunity for critical analyses of the election process and social relations in the U.S.

An important opportunity to ask why democracy in the U.S. ends after pulling a lever or pushing a button every two or four years? An important opportunity to ask why the continued reality of white supremacy in the United States is treated as if it were a thing of the past? To ask why we trust the media more than our neighbors or our own experiences? And ask how come we cannot imagine a totally different world, one where labor is free from all the fetters which economic exploitation has fastened on it; one free from all the institutions and procedures of political power; and one that opens the way to an alliance of free groups of men and women based on cooperative labor and planned administration of things in the interest of the community?

We can point to the absurdity of the idea that those who are frustrated and angry only need to re-shuffle the political deck and their lives will be better. The absurdity that the masses responsibility ends with the election of an "outsider." We can ask why it is that those who make this claim do not

suggest that the problem is the capitalist sponsored process? And we can emphasize what must be obvious to a person with a grain of political intelligence: that the present U.S. political problem is not whether a Democrat or Republican will be in the White House, but that one of them will again be in the White House.

Many avenues of political education, in the mainstream and grassroots, are useful for thinking about the ways in which a disproportionate distribution of wealth and power is constructed and reconstructed in different context and different periods. Are useful for thinking how the media and others we turn to for information give the impression that the current social relations are the best in the world and do not encourage alternative ways to frame and understand human relations against systems of power, privilege, and indifference.

We have many avenues open to us to drive home the lesson that there is one law for elites and one for the rest of us. For example, we can examine issues of domination and exploitation and focus on the structural rather than individual factors that maintain economic and social disparities. We can expose and critique normative assumptions that conflate democracy with capitalism and its role in supressing the exploration of alternative economic and social arrangements. We can move from dissent to resistance: protest, strike and/or rebel. Highly principled and courageous action that raises the issues of passive complicity which are now much too easily evaded.

Some seem to think that resistance will weaken the moral authority of what is essentially a social justice movement and make it difficult to reach potential sympathizers who are only willing to pledge technical support, I don't. A person has to choose for them self what level of dissent or resistance they are comfortable with. What level of dissent or resistance will break the duopoly of the Democratic and Republican parties.

Keeping in mind that we all take part in Washington politics as usual, the quid pro quo system of pay-to-play politics if only by paying taxes and

permitting domestic society to function smoothly [read: Boston Tea Party]; or by adding legitimacy to electoral politics by casting a vote. Even apathy perpetuates the status quo. Since when does doing nothing change conditions or a situation?

Personally I feel that resistance is justified, even President Obama, a self-professed progressive bailed out Wall Street while main street was left holding the debt, expanded the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, and filled his presidential cabinet with former Clinton operatives. The Clinton administration was centrist at best, conservative to be accurate. I cannot imagine pulling a lever or pushing a button this November as a tactic for making America people centered. My guess is that in the long run lever pulling/push button democracy will not change the material conditions of our lives.

Whoever is elected this Novemeber, there is bound to be significant repercussions. It is axiomatic that which ever party wins the people do not lose. I doubt that this would seem important to those in decision-making positions. I doubt that they appreciate the growing dissatisfaction among more and more families and communities who are disillusioned by candidates who are progressive in speech, but diabolical when elected. Which is why I doubt that lever pulling/push button democracy will make a measurable contribution to American society in transforming the lives and character of those who took part in it.

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