

One day... In Antiwar Politics

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Well, I was late, as usual. Missed the train - by only two minutes, I saw it leaving! - but the trains from Palo Alto don't run all that often! We are too rich for good public transport here you see. And I didn't want to drive, for various reasons, not least of was the obvious fact that I was immediately going to get lost. But the Stanford contingent at the station did not seem particularly large. I had no expectations, literally, since I hadn't really thought about it or had time to do so (finding out about it approximately 3am the night before - hence the lack of clear thinking, and arriving late). But there was no large group of Stanford students heading together towards the train station; or getting on the train together, as far as I could see. Nor any small group. Nor any group for that matter. No, as far as I knew, the Stanford contingent consisted entirely of me. Mind you, there may have been other isolated individuals, couples or small groups, which are practically invisible.

It's a slow, clunky and inefficient train, the sort of train you expect from public services in the US. Nevertheless the driver is always chirpily announcing each station, and there are conductors (shock horror to Melburnians!). And we must switch trains, but thanks to my 3am research I had this all figured out, and it was quite efficiently done. The other train network (BART) is much quicker, louder and generally fun. There was one woman with a placard on the train, wearing a militant unionist T-shirt, which was a little heartening. We got there eventually, 40 minutes late, maybe even fashionable.

Still on the platform, hang on a minute! There wasn't just the one lady with the placard. Now there were suddenly many people with placards. Not hippies! Not crazies! In fact ostensibly highly bourgeois and "normal" - highly dangerous terms to use, but it almost reminded me of the pictures one sees from Argentina in which "average housewives" (what a terrible phrase) and businessmen suddenly pull out their hammers and start beating on the boarded-up bank walls.

Up the escalator, into the throng! Well, it was something of a throng. I had no expectations. A few dozen? A few hundred? Thousand? Ten thousand? It looked like about 300. Oh well, you know, it's a start, kind of disappointing, but after the war starts perhaps you expect the movement to die down, as the populace once more adopts its philosophy of futility, consumerism and swallows all the rest of the opium. But I was expecting better, what with the now-long-obvious nature of the anarchy in Babylonia becoming clear to the public, and

the Cindy Sheehan phenomenon. Turned out I wasn't late at all, and the march was just about to head off.

So we took possession of the street, well one direction (2 lanes) anyway. With sufficiently small numbers this is dangerous - both on the personal danger-of-arrest level and the political danger-of-embarrassment level. We seemed just sufficiently large, but as we started moving we were comfortably so. Recall Bernoulli's equation - higher velocity means lower pressure means more volume. Bernoulli's equation on non-viscous incompressible laminar fluid protest, that is.

I doubt many of the participants were engaged in such idiotic quasi-mathematical wanderings as I was. Pseudo-danger was not far away. An overzealous and overweight cop immediately raced along to one side of the throng in his marked cop car (the SFPD police cars look far too much like stunt cars from movies), his head turned downward to some paper in his hands, and away from the road and the people. He was reciting some legislative magic words to remove our rights, to remove our constitutional force field, and render us vulnerable to arrest - these rights vary from place to place, but at least they exist here in some tattered form: "unauthorised march police move to the footpath" We were spilling on to the footpath anyway, and I was happy to stay there.

We were in the Mission District, a very Latino area. In my racist-vision I see the Mission as taquerias. Bemusement from the locals, they all came out to watch. Houses in the US (and in most places outside Australia) seem to be closer to the street. People sitting on the steps to their house (yes, all the houses look like the Full House house), watching usually dispassionately, occasionally with a smile, sometimes finding the absurdity, or the comedy, or the creative protest ideas of varying hilarity, enough to break into a chuckle. The worst I saw was one guy in his garage, open to the street, watching a rather loud Fox News and (possibly deliberately) ignoring us. Actually it's similar to how I imagine the residents and the storekeepers during the great protests of the 1930s (minus the fascists, the boarded-up stores, and the singular sadism of gratuitous police brutality, that is) - not exactly in awe or confident of salvation, but something is positive about it. Is it enough to activate the sense of hope? There are enough chores to do in the meantime, and there's no point getting your hopes up - we've been here before. In all, negligible annoyance at the disruption. Plenty of toots of support from passing motorists. Couples embracing on rooftops waving at us. This is San Francisco, after all. Feel the love! (I only saw hetero couples though; maybe I wasn't looking hard enough.)

A few prominent features immediately distinguish an American protest from an Australian counterpart. And among these one is by far the most evident, even at a distance: a much tighter rhythm section. Drummers at protests are nothing new - indeed a protest without drummers *would* be something new! - but the range, diversity, energy, volume, synergy and synchronicity of these guys was something. Close in, with no interference effects from delay. Just reverb off the buildings, usually two or three storeys - I told you, they are all the Full House house! Very raw, African and Latin beats. The protest classics (read: same tired old chants) took on a whole new aspect with some decent rhythm

backing. One of the great problems with most performances of the classics is, of course, destructive interference from diverging local chants - originally together, and locally always together, but small variations between local chants creep in, varying in tempo and intensity until globally there is just a morass of barely distinguishable hoarse peace-related words. (It's a non-trivial bundle?) With a strong central rhythm generator, at least among a crowd of reasonable size, these problems cease to exist. (Almost sounds like an argument for authoritarianism, argh.) And different sections of the crowd were being used for optimal artistic effect. 'No war', megaphoned one deep-throated individual, a descending minor third (same tune as 'borrrr-ing!'). Four beats of virtuoso drumming later, a dozen young ladies chirped back with: 'Not in our name!' Almost, catchy, you might say. Even I almost felt the need to boogie on down. Almost.

The American protest resembles much more strongly a kitsch commercial co-opted representation of a 60s rally, you know, like you see on ads for utes in Australia now. This may be surprising, since the composition of the crowd was much more outwardly conformist and mature than I have seen elsewhere, Argentina, pre-Iraq and union-organised rallies aside. I am loath to draw too many conclusions about to what extent 'dissent is normalised' or anything of this sort; these are bows too long to draw; it is very little evidence, with plenty of potential explanations. In a certain sense, of course dissent - of the 'liberal' variety - is normalised, and is overwhelmingly the public opinion throughout the Bay Area. The extent of radical dissent is an interesting question - it always is - it's always more than you think. But in any case I can't stand carping on about whether people look 'weird' or not. That's a ridiculous discussion in itself.

No, I decided that the principal explanation for the protest looking kitsch was the high placard-density. It seemed like every second person had one! The whole spectacle gives the impression of being an absurd puppet-play of strange objects bobbing in the sea. But then, the whole idea that we have a system where the only way for most of popular opinion to be enacted is by mass protest is absurd in itself. The system is absurdity. A march of placards towing people along in their wake is absurdity upon absurdity to alleviate the primordial absurdity.

Normally, at such events, I have an idea as to the general plan of the day, everyone does. You know, something like (a) start at A, go to B, jump up and down, go home; or (b) start at A, go to B, Trotskyists run to C and do something violent; or (c) congregate in public square, convoke mass meeting, take over the parliament building, form a revolutionary committee; or (d) start running everything yourselves and stop listening to your bosses and your masters, because it just seems like the natural thing to do. This time, however, I was particularly clueless. It seemed that plan (a) was the order of the day (ANSWER has Leninists/Trotskyists behind it but tactically submerges this fact), on a rather disappointing scale. The first observation was correct, but the second was not, and we promptly arrived at a park packed with fifty thousand people.

Little did I realise that ours had been a 'feeder' march for college students - the 'books not bombs' march. The real march had yet to begin. It was one of these large municipal parks with three or four fields on which to play

sport, sufficiently large that with 50,000 people there was plenty of space, and whole regions were empty. A big podium-stage projected another distinguishing feature from the corresponding Australian phenomena: a decent PA system. Parents and children sat in the shade on an embankment flanking the main field. Some stalls for various political organisations were set up at the other end. There was a chronic toilet shortage, a queue fifty metres long for the men's toilet, and an unmentionably long queue for the women's. And then I noticed *another* stage, another series of orators and cheers, and another throng around it. This was apparently the labour movement's stage - though of course not from the AFL-CIO (the main union organisation in the US), which has little to say on international affairs more progressive than Genghis Khan, and more than enough links to corruption, organised crime and the CIA - and sufficiently distinct from the main grouping to seek its own audience.

Something between a family picnic, a multi-stage concert event, and a global justice party: things like this can convince you we have a chance. Here they were, the children of the revolution, and the children of the children of the revolution! A revolution which, though it had plenty of support, never happened, except in the parodies of media distortion and the co-option of advertising. The speakers were eloquent, there were about a dozen I heard, and they were still speaking when most of the crowd had left on the main march. They did not have to scream to get their point across. The scope was impressive and quite detailed, they took their time: speakers on New Orleans, Palestine, Afghanistan, Haliburton and assorted looters, Sudan, race, the media, counter-recruiters and of course war mothers. Cindy Sheehan was in Washington though, which was the scene of the largest protest. Songs and poetry, much of it in Spanish. (Apparently Guantanamo is a protest song.) The range of opinion was broad, through from the expected insipid liberals to the invocation of the spirit and the politics of Che. Massive cheers at the mention of his name - the Latinos especially are all too well aware of his struggles against imperialism, the life dedicated to struggle, by principled armed conflict, murdered by the CIA. The right of return - for the residents of Palestine, and the residents of New Orleans! Reading letters from Iraqis - we are their only hope, they say - the only superpower which can defeat the hegemonic one is the accretion of public opinion and consequent crystalline action. And most were quite clear that the Democrats, though less insane, were no solution and would have largely committed the same crimes. This didn't stop a lot of Democrat supporters from turning up and waving Democrat flags. After all, the first-order electoral implication of anti-war politics is 'Anybody But Bush' - that is, vote Democrat.

It was all rather pleasant really, a little too pleasant. In a fairly civilized city like San Francisco it almost seems there is nobody left to convince; no member of the Bush family comes anywhere near. Imperial Princess Condoleeza came here a year or two I think and was heckled off stage - far too mild a dispatch, of course, considering her crimes. But there are plenty of people left to radicalise, plenty of facts to circulate, plenty of links to be drawn, and plenty of questions to answer. And it's useful to have empirical proof that, despite the propaganda, people have largely come to similar conclusion to you - rather radical conclusions. And all

the more amazingly so, considering that with the indoctrination and alienation of modern society, such logic must be performed person by person, individual by individual, one by one, each alone against an overwhelming tide of lopsided information and opinion. Confronted with the greatest thought control system yet invented, not all of us succumb - actually nobody succumbs, they just ignore, or think it's hopeless, or believe there is nothing to succumb to - and one must assume that of those who do not, only a small proportion have the means, hope, opportunity, and optimism (or realism, depending on your point of view) to come out to a demonstration. We are everywhere! What idiosyncrasies, what eccentrics all these boys and girls are! The human intellect is not programmable, we have residual ethics in us yet! They have divided us, yes, they have infected and captured the institutions of power and information - but logic, a smattering of disconcerting facts, and the hardwired evolutionary precepts of mutual aid are enough to hold the line of last defence. We are immune now!

And so fifty thousand eccentrics set off down the road on a rather pleasant walk. Probably more, I'm citing a newspaper with that number, I never could see either end of the march. At one point the march turned right onto a main road and people climbed up on traffic control boxes: 'No! NO! Go left! Go left!' Placard density remained high, and occasionally witty. We had all sorts of statements. Topical: 'Make levees, not war'; 'George is a Category 5 Hurricane'. Sports-mad: 'Beat LA, not Iraq, go Giants!' (The SF Giants are the local baseball team.) Travel: 'Don't you wanna marry me? I'm Canadian.' Hungry: 'Make pizza not war'. Consumer oriented: 'Peace: Back by Popular Demand'. The archetypically Californian 'Bad idea, dude!' And finally, 'Send the Twins', though I wasn't sure whether this was referring to Bush's daughters, or the Olsen twins, who I am sure would charm the entire country immediately. And so on, and so on.

One stuck in my mind, I thought it was the sort of placard I would carry, both because of its content, and its style: unfunny, scientific, self-referential. 'No to: Capitalism, Imperialism, Vanguardism. Yes to: Workers' Control, Direct Democracy, Critiquing this Sign.' That seems to be a perfect assessment of liberatory and properly democratic politics today: accepting these (at least 4 out of 6 very popular, I think, the others natural conclusions from them) premises, all the big questions are still entirely open; no uniform answers; not enough thinking about answers; not enough clear thinking to get to the questions.

The march couldn't assemble in the Civic Centre of the city, which would have been an appropriate place, that's where the UN was founded. Instead the centre was filled with the annual San Francisco Loveparade. Probably, on reflection, a much better use for the town square. I went there afterwards.

We ended up at another big park, this one on the side of a hill, with a stage and PA set up and the bottom, forming a natural auditorium. As we approached it was a very familiar phenomenon. On the average protest march through Melbourne, the young Liberals, those indefatigable capitalist zealots, find some corner on which to stand with Liberal placards - not with slogans, but pictures of Howard/Costello, seems they have a cult of personality! - and shout abuse from behind a line of police, usually at the intellectual level of

"you're all stupidheads", provocation plain and simple. Well here they were, not the Liberals, not the republicans, but the Zionists! Jewish flags covered a bottleneck leading into the park. Similar placard style: parodies of the left ones, suggesting that we protesters support terrorists, dictators and so on. (Of course, the opposite is true: the US government does precisely this.) They had some police cover, but less cowardly than the young Liberals, just a few scattered officers. The Melbourne bluebloods evidently feel more of a need to maintain their hairdos.

So did a fight break out? Did the provocation succeed? Did the two sides come into conflict? Yes to all counts. As we approached, half a dozen or so people broke off and rushed up to them. And took them on - in argument, that is. Really it's quite comical watching two clearly irreconcilable opinions clash, the contenders so overeager to convey the truth to the other, patiently waiting for the penny to drop and the other side to submit to the power of utter obviousness. When the argument got heated (and it didn't much) a cop came over to stand nearby, his hands on his hips like an unimpressed parent, doing his best to look away straight-faced.

In this seething congregation of humanity, however, the Zionists were miniscule, and their right to be there was respected as a matter of course. All the rest were up the slope, and there in the sun we baked. More sitting on a grassy hillside listening to obvious truth; more feeling good about ourselves. But that is not to diminish it: the proposition "we can make a difference" is one for which belief - measured in numbers, and in intensity - can make a truth of itself.

There was plenty of capitalism to be seen anyway, and indeed, plenty of profits to be made when 50,000 hungry people are sitting on a hillside not doing much. I got sunburnt. The ice-cream vendors made a killing. At the top of the hill was a line of stalls/tents: hot dogs, corn dogs, popcorn, nuts, potatoes, organic, vegetarian and vegan stuff, it was a regular food court up there.

But capitalist competition was not only to be seen in this obvious sense of goods for eating. There was plenty of competition among ideas, among the various clubs and sects and societies and theories and parties of the left. There was another market on one side of the park, tents and stalls all lined up; it was bigger than the food court. Such a smorgasbord! But most of it was pretty distasteful to me.

In fact, away from the stirring speeches and the inspiring array of people all around, all the problems of the left were plain to see. For a start, so many conspiracy theorists! How can there be so many of these nutters?! They just rave incoherently, mistake the occasional coincidence for sinister world conspiracy with US/Israel/CIA/MI5/Mossad/Jews/English monarchy - or whoever else, take your pick - running the world. And surely enough, there are some strange facts on the books. But among a sufficiently large sample of events, improbable coincidences become probable. In any case the conclusions drawn are ridiculous. Things are more complicated than that. The trick is to explain all the unaccounted-for facts. The conspiracy theorists take the easy way out, postulating incredibly improbable explanations or outright falsity. The volume of facts and analysis missing in mainstream media - indeed, the 'standard model'

for the world, if you like - is just outrageous, and unforgivable. But we all know that. The worst symptom, however, is that to the average person acquainted only with the 'standard model', the presentation of problematic but indisputably true facts, and analysis putting it all together, is basically indistinguishable from this incoherent raving of lunatics. Noam Chomsky (radical scholar extraordinaire) and Lyndon LaRouche (populist conspiracy theorist extraordinaire) run together in this vague notion of a scary, dangerous netherworld. The second-worst symptom is the sheer number of people believing this sinister conspiratorial nonsense. Having discovered an unpopular and hidden truth, perhaps they become convinced of their own significance as the object of revelation; perhaps they so radically realign their beliefs (and they should) that they lose all compass, swallowing the line wholesale. One can make less charitable speculations also.

All things considered, however, the conspiracy theorists are quite a minuscule contingent also - it's just that they stick out. And it is amongst those parties and societies and activist groups which have some basis in reality where the worst problems can be seen. It's a galaxy of disconnected, fratricidal, sectarian groupings, united at this protest yes, but the commonalities do not go much further. From the CPUSA, to the Spartacists, to the 'Party of Socialism and Liberation', to the ISO, to various anarchist collectives, to the Greens, to the environmental societies, to ballot initiatives, to voting drives, to single-issue activist groups - abortion, this or that national park, dolphins, turtles, this or that endangered species, education, teaching, segregation, globalisation, NAFTA, Chiapas, Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Cuba, Puerto Rico - to who knows what else. Most of the political parties are old, too old, crushed by the dead weight of history. Some belonging in the dustbin of history. Some new and accordingly infinitesimal. Far too many authoritarian, some more openly so. Some advocating non-violence, some agnostic, some advocating violence. Sure, there are plenty of perspectives: if you take a radical position (and recall from your mathematics or Greek that 'radical' means 'root', i.e. you consider that we must get to the root of social problems and fundamentally reorganise society), then what to put in place of the existing system is not at all obvious. The Leninists still believe that appointing an 'enlightened' vanguard of Party elites into power will benevolently lead to Utopia; one century later, history now backs up common sense to convince us of the improbability of this scenario. The Marxists believed that once capitalism was swept away - as was scientifically predicted to happen - socialism would naturally take its place. No credibility remains for this statement, though it once seemed a reasonable hypothesis - and in fact most of Marx's thought has passed into common sense, usually minus the heretical name. There are many choices, many visions, many strategies, many tactics. There are many worlds, as Subcommandante Marcos might say.

These are questions for everyone to discuss: they are not to be foreclosed without discussion; they are not to be answered with certainty. Eternal doubt is the basis of all science, all the more so when humans are involved. Eternal doubt, questioning, proposing, verifying and negating, this process, which is as comfortable with social justice and social organisation as it is with physics, is the

basis of all progress - all of our knowledge is provisional. We are ready to revise the old authoritarian strategies. We are ready to exhume the ideas and strategies of their opponents, those who opposed the tactics chosen but shared their general aims: the Mensheviks, the anarchists, the libertarian socialists, the Spanish CNT, all sorts of acronyms across the world. And of course we can learn plenty from the mass movements of the 1960s, and the ongoing liberation struggles across the South: notably the Zapatistas; in Brazil, though fading rapidly; and Venezuela. All the questions of where we ought to go are the questions of our time! They require discussion, renewed and reinvigorated. These are essential fields of thought and research. They ought not to lie dormant for so long. Fragmentation into mutually clashing parties and competing tendencies with negligible influence, negligible following and negligible inspiration is the worst possible course. Comrades in arms are not enemies to fight, and they cannot be expected to agree on everything. Allies and fellow-travellers are not to be dismissed as inferior. We are all in this together.

Humanity is crying out for a viable alternative, all across the world. There are ideas, some louder than others. But there is not enough thinking, and not enough discussion. Global environmental agreements? Fair trade? Debt forgiveness? Foreign aid? International labour standards? Ethical investment? Independent media? The Keynesian programme? Progressive taxation? Withdrawing support for dictators and terrorists? International law? Guaranteed living wage? Revocation of corporate charters? Another Briand-Kellogg pact? A shorter working week? Participatory budgeting? Open borders? World federation? Market socialism? Democratic planning? Participatory economics? Abolition of employment? Economic democracy? The panoply of options beckons us, a thousand vague beacons, some near, some far. With proximity comes clarity but also dullness, inefficacy, subservience to power, and vulnerability to rollback.

Do you see the possibilities? Left of centre is no accurate description, it is an infinite dimensional space. To hear all these proposals, to debate them, to propose your own - set the parameters of your favourite world! - it is a liberation. That our trajectory has apparently stabilised within one small corporate-capitalist region - and history, anthropology, technology, elementary notions of justice, and logic all demonstrate just how small that region really is - is no proof that we are thereby condemned. The most cursory glance at history illustrates radical change on a regular basis for the last 500 years at least, and we are all well aware that the pace of change is orders of magnitude faster today. Besides, it is clear that this is not a stable trajectory, if it is left to coast on its present course it will shortly explode, possibly taking the human race with it. The trajectory is a function of every human action, and it is regularly altered by forces outside the state and the corporation. And any state with a vestige of democracy can be influenced. And corporations can be regulated. They can even be abolished. All these institutions are artificial, and they can be redesigned, re-imagined, and rebuilt.

To forge beyond the mildest progress - which is also the most urgent - we must visualise it first. We must play to win. Envision the way you might like

the world to be, everyday life; now can you just go out and do it today? Not all of it is today illegal; it is a free world, in some respects; we have beaten back state power on some fronts. To envision, and then refine and critique that vision, is to engage in the most incisive form of protest; only then can it be enacted. Only then can the trajectory be perturbed out of a catastrophic orbit. It is disappointing that first-order approximations failed, but that is obvious to us today - we have progressed since then, we are smarter now, we understand, and we have undreamed-of technical capacities, which will only improve. We do not write blueprints for our future selves, for our selves are part of the process, information feeds back, and courses of action are chosen accordingly. But without any idea where we would like to go, without any idea of the possibilities of what better worlds might look like, all our actions and demonstrations will merely be reducing our speed, while we remain on the same catastrophic trajectory. Single-issue activism, focusing solely on one achievable or possibly-achievable goal is not enough. To win a better world, we must have some idea what a better world is. At present the ideas for a better world - which surely exist - are not enough known, or considered, discussed, or debated, as they must be. And in the park the speeches wore on, and they were broad in their scope, but they all missed entirely this question of vision.

All around the world, the same is happening. Something is seething, but something is also burning, something is shaking in uncontrollable anger, something is weeping with uncontainable pity, something is smirking, something is spinning out of control, and something is trying to restore sanity. We must restabilise, we must push for a social trajectory towards a sane society. Which forces will prevail is still in doubt. The human future, if it eventuates, will not have mercy in its judgment on the choices we make now.