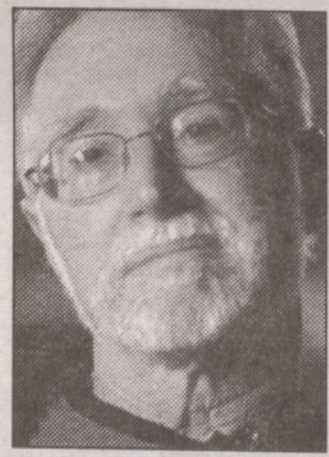


Radicals and Reformers: Part 3: Cooperation means we win!



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In my column in the April 13 edition of Street Roots I explained how radicals who indiscriminately denounce cap and trade and carbon trading unnecessarily undermine reformers fighting for the only way to prevent climate change before it is too late. In the May 11 edition, my column explained how reformers fighting to make capitalism less unfair and inefficient who denounce radicals calling for “system change” only further empower those defending the status quo. I could have provided other examples where radicals and reformers have chosen to undermine one another unnecessarily, to the detriment of both, but why not concentrate instead on what can happen when radicals and reformers cooperate?

In 1920, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, we won women the right to vote in all elections in all states. But the long struggle to win women voting rights was waged by a movement that included radicals as well as reformers. Moreover, the women’s movement fought in ways that laid the groundwork for “second wave feminists” to advance the cause of women’s liberation much further 50 years after women won the right to vote.

In 1935, with passage of the National Labor Relations, or Wagner Act, we won protection from retaliation for workers seeking to bargain collectively with their employers, including “full freedom of association, self-organization, and designation of representatives of their own choosing, for the purpose of negotiating the terms and conditions of their employment or other mutual aid or protection.” But this reform victory also paved the way for leftists working in the labor movement to spread the “radical” notion among tens of millions of enthusiastic new union members that those who do the work deserve to enjoy all the fruits of their labors.

A hundred years after the Civil War freed slaves we finally outlawed unequal voter registration requirements and racial segregation in schools, workplaces, and facilities that serve the general public with passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But in the process of fighting for equal rights African Americans were also able to free themselves and many whites from the shackles of a white supremacist ideology that haunted the country from its inception. Neither would have been possible had not integrationist “reformers” and black power “radicals” managed to cooperate despite profound differences.

In April 1975 the Vietnam War ended in no small part because of the anti-war campaign waged by the US peace movement. But the anti-Vietnam War movement also left a core of Americans who have never forgotten that the doctrine of “American Exceptionalism” is a lie, and who continue to fight against every new imperial venture. (I am one American who can trace my radicalization directly to the anti-Vietnam war movement, and who continues to believe that the first duty of every citizen is to prevent his or her government from harming citizens of other countries.)

Radicals and reformers – with profound disagreements – participated together in every one of these great social movements. Every one of these social movements achieved more than many initially believed possible, and every one fell short of what many hoped for. But the important point is that when radicals and reformers learned how to keep their differences from preventing them from cooperating, both came out the better for it. Not only do successful mass movements win reforms, they create a political environment where more radical ideas about what we should change can grow. It is a mistake for radicals to conclude that because a mass movement fails to take what we see as the logical next step that the movement did not advance the cause of fundamental system change. The relevant question is: “Where would the cause of system change have been had there been no mass social movement?” If the answer is: “Not as far along,” then radicals as well as reformers win when social movements are more successful – which only happens when radicals and reformers do not undermine one another needlessly.

If those calling for eco-socialism and those fighting to prevent climate change while global capitalism persists can cooperate, we just may prevent climate change before it is too late – and in the process create treaties and domestic policies that demonstrate the practicality of the economics of equitable cooperation. If we continue to fail to cooperate we will achieve neither.

If radicals and reformers work together to replace plutocratic capitalism with a “new economy” – with stronger unions, more cooperatives, more community development corporations, more locally supported agriculture, and more environmentally and socially responsible businesses – we can simultaneously weaken the stranglehold of giant corporations and sow seeds that eventually blossom into a full-blown

participatory economy.

At the moment Greece is ground zero. The old regime in Greece has vanished. First an establishment, center-right government failed. Then an establishment center left government failed. Then a caretaker government of technocrats failed. And now elections have led to a political stalemate in which no government could be formed, and new elections are scheduled for June 17. If voting trends continue on their present course, it is quite possible that a real left-coalition government will emerge from these elections. If this happens many will focus on the political parties in the new government and its emergency policies. But an equally important question will be what young, radical Greek anti-authoritarians do, and how the new government relates to them. Over the past five years Greek anti-authoritarians mostly shunned electoral politics to spearhead protests against corruption and austerity and build alternative institutions. In the process, they have become increasingly numerous and well organized. After making little progress for years, left political parties who focused instead on elections have just expanded their share of the vote dramatically. Much depends on whether these left political parties and the anti-authoritarians can overcome differences and figure out ways to aid and protect one another instead of squabbling. If they work out a productive division of labor, they may be able to combine their new electoral strength with a powerful radical base in streets and neighborhoods to (1) implement a strong economic program of national salvation, (2) accelerate the growth of new institutions of equitable cooperation, and (3) protect the new governments from both domestic and foreign anti-democratic elements. If they do not cooperate, right wing authoritarianism may follow in the wake of the collapse of the traditional Greek establishment.

All of us – not just Greeks – are living in a time of crisis. Traditional elites are failing miserably to respond effectively to financial crises, unemployment crises, education crises, ecological crises, and political crises everywhere. Whether strong peoples’ movements will rise to the occasion and solve these crises will depend in part on whether radicals and reformers learn how to better manage our differences so as to be able to cooperate. History says we can win when we do.

Mine

By Jacob Averi

I always wonder what people see when they look at me.
A short boy with a baby face.
Or maybe they see the girl side of me,
This feminine part that is usually invisible to me.
Maybe they see a dangerous kid –
White rag around his neck, flicking a razor-sharp knife around,
Etching his love into a tree for some unknown girl.
Sometimes that rag goes up, yes, and sometimes that knife comes out.
To be honest, I just like the sound it makes.
To be honest, I just get tired of the shit I have to put up with,
And I know nobody will talk to someone with his face covered.
I like hiding. I like feeling safe.
And being on the streets a nineteen, a young guy is pretty often not safe.
But look, I’ve got my friends, my rag, my wife.
I’m safe. I’m happy. I will carve my name into all the fucking trees I want
With my girlfriend’s scratched crudely underneath and a rough heart
Surrounding it all.
This is my life: messy and jagged and all mine.

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