

<http://divergences.be/spip.php?article909>



# Election Shock Therapy: Primary Pain

- Archives - 2008 - N°12. Mars/march/märz 2008 - International - United States -

Publication date: Wednesday 12 March 2008

---

Copyright © Divergences, Revue libertaire internationale en ligne - All rights reserved

---

*"You know what? Fuck beauty contests. Life is one fucking beauty contest after another....*

*Fuck that."* (Little Miss Sunshine) [1]

In 1961, at Yale University, Stanley Milgram led a series of experiments that I am reminded of when I think about elections. Milgram (1974a) set out to "set up a simple experiment... to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to". The experiments involved giving orders to participants to administer electric shocks to another apparent volunteer when the later failed to answer correctly. In Milgram's first set of experiments, 65 percent of participants administered the experiment's lethal final 450-volt shock. During the experiment, if the volunteer hesitated the authority figure could give a series of prompts (subtle orders), these were:

*Please continue.*

*The experiment requires that you continue.*

*It is absolutely essential that you continue.*

*You have no other choice, you must go on*

Anyone who has investigated the logic of capitalism and the state will recognise these prompts as the justifications that are fallen back on when reason destroys all other arguments for these authoritarian institutions. It will come as no surprise therefore that ideas such as ' *You have no choice, you must go on*' are common justifications for the electoral system; justifications we must show to be false.

Every night on TV vacuous inane politicians parade themselves on podiums around the country, reminiscent of the living Barbie dolls of beauty pageants, in need of adulation with an equally consuming desire to win. Sadly, unlike beauty pageants the results of the Presidential election have the potential to affect the lives of everyone on the planet. So I, along with the rest of the world, sit and wait as the United States of America lurches forward towards electing a new president. The first stages of the process are well underway and the field of possible candidates is already massively decimated from the initial list of hopefuls. The election process consists of three stages the 'primary', the 'convention' and the 'election'. The primaries aim to make selections of delegates for each party national convention; these delegates are selected through state elections, state caucuses and state conventions. The aim is for each candidate to secure enough delegates that support them to ensure they are named as the Party Nominee at the convention, so that they can go on to stand in the election. A system that is complicated by a secondary tier of delegates known as 'super-delegates' made up of party officials and other selected political figures who are free to vote either way at the party convention.

Although the party conventions are not scheduled until the summer and the election on November 4th, Presidential hopefuls are already dropping like flies or being sidelined from the mainstream media agenda. Although there are many candidates still in the running from the Prohibition Party's Gene Amondson to the Socialist Party USA's Brian Moore these are irrelevant to the election. In fact the extent of the media's ability to manipulate the election process is evident in the situation that there are three Democrat Candidates in the running (Hillary Rodham Clinton, Mike Gravel, and Barack Obama) and four Republican Candidates (Mike Huckabee, John McCain, Ron Paul and Mitt Romney) although from the media you would only have known that Clinton and Obama are running for the Democrats and Huckabee and McCain for the Republicans. During the primaries it has become clear that the Democrat party look like they are in line for winning the next election, and Barack Obama appears to be the

candidate that is developing momentum towards that win, although the super delegates could in an ironic twist select the less popular candidate to lead the party into the election. Whilst McCain appears to be the favored candidate for the republicans, although rumours are circulating about inappropriate relationships with a lobbyist in the past, so we will have to see how this plays out.

In a recent twist Ralph Nader entered into the race as a independent candidate, and although he has no chance of winning, and likely will garner less votes than he has previously, he will remain a thorn in the side of the Democrats as he asks some of the questions they would rather were not asked, and continues to expose all the candidates Republican or Democrat as the corporate candidates that they are, due to his media celebrity status he is able to get himself on TV where other small time party's cannot.

After sidelining most of the problematic candidates, the remaining candidates and the media have selected a few key issues through which the election will be framed for the public. The media places candidates in relation to each other in terms of these issues, placing them on the basis of how they say each other fit, and not in relation to their actual written positions. The elections are played out on TV screens across the country, computer graphics chart the relative successes and failures of the candidates and illustrate the polled questions that the mainstream media have decided polarise society; this spectacle was further extended into new media when CNN hosted an internet debate using you-tube.

For the republicans the Christian conservative Right remains a central part of their constituency, however, unlike the previous two elections the Evangelical movement is unlikely to play as central a role as they are no longer unified behind a candidate and some are even speaking out on behalf of the Democrats. The most conservative candidate is Hukabee who likes to say: "I didn't major in math; I majored in miracles" which in his case seem to be running in short supply, as he has not a chance in hell of winning the republican part candidacy.

With the Democrats presidential hopefuls down essentially to Obama and Clinton the issues of race and gender have become central issues by which primary votes are dissected. Perhaps unsurprisingly there has been a strong movement of women voting for Clinton, anxious to see a woman in the Presidential position for the first time. Interestingly the racial difference is not black/white but black/Latino with the Latino vote is predominantly for Clinton, which has been her advantage in many states. However when it comes to the elections proper these differences will likely be irrelevant as they are simply the differences between solid Democrat voters. The rural urban divide continues to be a dividing line between the Republicans (rural) and the democrats (urban). The Democrats are hoping they will be able to swing some of the rural based states, and interestingly McCain the likely Republican nominee is weaker in the rural areas than his republican opponents, which may help the Democrats to achieve this.

The War in Iraq (Afghanistan has been quietly forgotten) is becoming a major issue within the presidential race, most particularly between the two democratic hopefuls. Obama has positioned himself as the anti-war candidate (as he did not vote for the war), Democrats are being drawn in by his anti-war rhetoric, however, his actual positions are not quite as anti-war as many would like, differing very little from Clintons. Another major issue will be the economy, the Republican Bush administration has pushed the economy to the brink of recession, with escalating debts and unrestrained spending, the Democrats previous good record on balancing the budget will be a huge advantage going into the election. As poverty increases behind the façade of the America dream people are looking for a President who will be willing to help the average person as much as Bush has helped corporate interests. It is perhaps this hope more than anything that is driving the wish for a change in government, perhaps best exemplified in Obama's slogan "Change you can believe in" and his constant refrain that he is the only candidate giving people hope.

As anti-authoritarians we should be aware that elections offer no real hope of change, the President may change but the system will stay the same, and a nicer face on capitalist exploitation is still capitalist exploitation. The system is built on violence, and uses elections to mandate itself with legitimacy. The participation in elections is a more violent

action than anything in the Milgram experiments, the mainstream media criticised Milgram for exposing the violence that normal people will carry out at the orders of authority, yet the same criticism is rarely levelled at state authority that routinely orders such violent actions. There were two theories put forward to explain the results of the experiment. The first is the theory of conformism, in which an individual without expertise will leave decisions to the group and its hierarchy. The second, agentic state theory, in which a person comes to view themselves as instruments for carrying out others wishes, and therefore relinquishes responsibility for their actions. Milgram (1974a) pointed out that "Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process" and that "even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear...[]...relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority." These are important findings that we must consider when trying to oppose the system of representative democracy, and particularly the election process.

As anti-authoritarians we desire an end to beauty pageant politics, and instead desire the growth of a grassroots anti-state anti-capitalist movement, as such we understand that elections have no part to play in our project, they have however traditionally been a time at which we have made arguments in our propaganda against voting in elections. It is important that as anti-authoritarians we continue to be anti-political in theory and in practice. We must continue to put across our view that voting for even the 'least worst candidate' still perpetuates the worst system of inequality and violence on society. We are however at a disadvantage, as during the election period millions of dollars are spent by both political parties on their propaganda, and with such a miniscule budget in comparison we cannot hope to compete. We must therefore remember that elections are not the only time an anti-election and anti-political message can be pursued and we should apply this message whenever politicians are failing or weakened, combining this at the same time with the positive alternatives we are continually developing. So, whilst considering the election we must remember that no change in the president will end the class war, and our fight for justice, liberty, and equality will continue regardless of the result.

*From the shadows of the White House this is Leon F. Czolgosz*

### Short bibliography of the Milgram Experiments:

Milgram S.

- ▶ 1963. Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. 67:371-8.
- ▶ 1974 (a) Article: "The Perils of Obedience"
- ▶ 1974 (b) *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*.

---

[1] Dwayne. In the film '*Little Miss Sunshine*' (2006). Written by Michael Arndt. (Distributed by Fox Searchlight Pictures).