

# Choose Your Opponent And Other Serious Nonsense

**or,  
It's a lie, it's a scam, and it already didn't work**

**or,  
Pull the other one, it's got bells on it**

**or,  
A critique so nice, I wrote it twice**

**or,  
A spectre is haunting who now?**

Back in 2020, I wrote something about the slogan "choose your opponent", which had begun to emerge in 2016 and was gathering even more momentum as it was deployed in support of the Biden/Harris ticket. In the end, the piece stayed in my drawer. This year, 2024, as "choose your opponent" continued to be the refrain of choice of the U.S. electoralist left, a friend and comrade sent me an eloquent articulation of the approach (also written in 2020) by a writer and thinker I've respected and admired for decades. I started to write something responding to it, and then, as I began to understand why I found the approach worse the more I thought about it, I realized that the two pieces needed to be combined.

## **FIRST**

This is not about telling you to vote, not to vote, who to vote for, or who to vote against. It's not even really about the question of voting at all: it's about how we think about strategy, it's about the ethical and political logics that shape our movements, and it's about lies. As in Amilcar Cabral's famous words: "Tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories". But because it's about the argument of last resort deployed for the past decade by those trying to persuade organizers and other movement folks to vote for – and actively promote – the Democratic Party nominee, no matter what and no matter who, I need to start (and end) by saying something about voting.

To me, one of the very few useful things that the results of an election can do, at the scale of the state, is help shape an environment for organizing, agitation, and movement work in general. Not through an administration's policies (either positively or negatively: "the worse the better" is just as bullshit as "the lesser evil"), and not through progressives' access to or influence on state officials, but because of the relationship between rhetoric and reality within a given regime's exercise of state power (and its progressive supporters' practice). I think the upsurges of militancy that began during the Clinton and Obama presidencies became what they did in part because each of those men (and the politicians and NGOs aligned with them) encouraged people to see new possibilities as being within reach – and then did everything they could to squelch any chance of those possibilities becoming materially real. The Kennedy/Johnson years are cut from the same cloth, right down to liberals' retrospective rewriting and

selective narration of all of these administrations' actions (in particular their common emphasis on the expansion of imperial military action, including the massive counterinsurgency campaigns they each deployed against mass movements for justice within the U.S.).

I was excited in 2016 for the prospect of a Hilary Clinton presidency because I hoped she would do for feminist organizing what Obama had done for racial justice work, simply by being herself, and so giving us a comprehensive demonstration that symbolic representation has nothing to do with the material conditions of people's lives. The loss of that possibility is still one of the things I'm angriest about in the Democratic Party's refusal to contest that election theft – which was no surprise, after their previous refusals in 2000 and 2004. I think a Harris presidency might or might not offer a similar situation, depending on what happens around her (I don't think that's reason to vote for her, myself, but I think it's a better reason than anything the "choose your opponent" approach offers).

"Choose your opponent", as a slogan, does open the door to the electoral left reassessing their thinking about their project. Sadly, however, for those committed to drumming up support for Harris in 2024 (as with Biden in 2020), it doesn't serve them well once it's taken seriously as an approach on its own terms and applied to their favored candidates. More significantly for our movements, its premises have already been rejected in practice by those involved in the most effective and vital parts of the current U.S. left, and pose a deep problem for anyone committed to structural change. And perhaps most importantly of all, at its heart are specific appeals to ethical and political logics that should have no place anywhere in our movements.

## I. APPLICATION

### ITS OWN TERMS

The "choose your opponent" argument, at heart, is a rejection of the "reward our friends, punish our enemies" model (to use the phrasing I learned in the labor movement) that has generally guided progressive and radical organizations who enter the electoral sphere. It proposes that instead of supporting candidates whose policy positions and record align with our aims and ethics, and opposing those whose stances do not, we should vote for and organizationally back the politician most likely to win who we believe will be "the best opponent", regardless of their policy positions and record.

This is, in certain ways, a huge improvement on many approaches to electoral politics. It does not depend on the fantasy that politicians can be our friends. It acknowledges, in its phrasing, that politicians and elected officials are part of the state, and so cannot ever be part of movements that oppose state actions or state power. It even implicitly recognizes that activists, organizers, and other movement people who become politicians are no longer part of our movements – however much we may like them as people – but are our targets and opponents (at best: in practice they are usually our enemies, and our movements would be more effective if we were theirs as well).

However, the emergence and rise of "choose your opponent" is not due to these shifts in perspective, but comes from its appeal to a rhetoric of pragmatism – an unavoidable move for electorally-oriented leftists who are comparatively clear-eyed about the Democratic Party<sup>1</sup>. It provides a basis for centering political work (especially electoral political work) on the presidential contest in a moment when there

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1 The appeal of pragmatism itself, however, seems to me to mainly be about the 501c world's core practice of seeking technical solutions to address political and interpersonal problems which cannot in fact be solved through technical means. But that's another essay entirely.

is no candidate whose proposed policies and past record align *at all* with our movements' aims or ethics. And, perhaps more importantly, it can be used to justify combining support for specific progressive local politicians running on the Democratic Party line with continued overall support for the presidential candidate heading the national party, as part of a leadership that consistently attacks, demeans, and opposes precisely those candidates.

The thing about appeals to pragmatism, though, is that they are testable. And the "choose your opponent" test gives very clear results for Harris, for Biden, and for the Democratic Party. More importantly, taking the phrase seriously as more than rhetoric makes it possible to see why being guided by that test and its premises is a problem for our movements.

What makes politicians "good opponents", from an organizing perspective, can only be how responsive they are to pressure from the left. Do they shift their positions, revise their policy proposals, change their legislative votes based on what our movements say and do (from taking critical or oppositional public positions to targeting them with direct action<sup>2</sup>)? The same criterion of movability applies to political parties: do they shift their platform positions, legislative priorities, and resource distribution among candidates in response to movement pressure?

The greatest strength of "choose your opponent" is the fact that these are simple questions that are easy to answer based on any established politician or party's existing record, and to crosscheck by looking at a candidate's actions while campaigning, and again after they have been in office.

## ADVANCE TESTING

It was already possible to say in 2020 that Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, and the party they represent, are about as bad possible opponents for our justice movements as one could invent. Here's the summary assessment I wrote in September 2020, unedited:

Biden's lasting support for white supremacist policies has been completely impervious to pressure from the left. He opposed desegregation after the March on Washington and assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.; he authored the notorious 1994 criminalization bill just years after expanding criminalization had sparked uprisings in the country's two largest cities; while Vice President he was unwavering in his support for the expansion of deportations in the face of nationwide mobilizations in support of immigrants; his current proposal to increase federal funding for police comes after six years of steadily growing demands for decarceration and defunding police (backed even by liberals who oppose abolition). Substantial direct pressure and public embarrassment have not even gotten him to express regret at his past actions.

Nor does the fact that a progressive policy polls better than he himself does affect Biden's positions. He has remained similarly unmoved by decades of pressure for universal health care – most recently in the form of Medicare For All – remaining unaffected by progressive pressure towards a wildly popular policy even after over 200,000 deaths from a pandemic fed by the lack of a national health care system.

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2 Let's be clear, here, in the spirit of Cabral: "Direct action" means actions that have a concrete, material effect on their target. If the only concrete effect is on something else (commuters at Grand Central Station, say), and the only way the supposed target is affected is by seeing a photo in the media, it ain't direct action, it's a photo op. If you're not doing something that has a concrete effect on the supposed target while being arrested, it ain't direct action, it's arrest-based lobbying. If you cut off the water to the event hall and the Friends of the IDF has to cancel their gala, and you aren't arrested or even seen anywhere nearby, that's direct action.

Harris, similarly, has never shifted an inch because of pressure from the left. Throughout her campaign, she has proudly run on her record as a "top cop" who went beyond the structural imperatives of the job by actively denying incarcerated trans folks medical care, refusing to comply with Supreme Court orders to reduce deadly prison overcrowding, and even trying to block people's release from prison specifically to preserve California's supply of incarcerated slave-labor firefighters. Similarly, in discussing her Senatorial record she has doubled and tripled down on her use of legislation attacking sex workers to gut the non-corporate internet, during precisely the years when decades of organizing for the decriminalization of sex work has finally found some welcome in electoral and labor movement politics and internet freedom has become ever more visibly vital. Harris has continued to push SESTA/FOSTA as a signature achievement even as QAnon seizes on the 'sex trafficking' moral panic her bill fueled to justify its far right conspiracy theories. All of this, and more, has been a subject of very public pressure from the left throughout her career and campaign – with no results.

The same can be said about the Democratic Party as a whole. After a brief flirtation with progressive legislation during the Kennedy and Johnson years, it has been nearly immune to pressure from the left. Its platforms have moved steadily to the right, even on issues like reproductive justice where its earlier progressive position spoke (and speaks) for a massive majority of voters. Its legislative leaders and presidents have leaped at every opportunity to jump to the right on issues ranging from healthcare to racial justice to climate change, mass deportations, and the military spending for invasions and sanctions that have killed millions of people. And when progressive candidates do manage to fight their way through a deeply hostile machine structure to win a congressional seat – generally as hugely popular figures both locally and nationally – the party disavows their policy positions and withholds resources and support. And then it backs their opponents outright in future election cycles, even when they have held a seat for many years (ask Senator Markey (D-MA)).

What's more, all of this has taken place over a forty year period that has seen massive progressive mobilizations that have repeatedly mobilized huge numbers across the country to oppose militarism (in the early 1980s, early 1990s, and early 2000s), defend immigrants (in the early 1980s, late 1990s, mid 2000s, and mid/late 2010s), resist white supremacy (in the late 1980s/early 1990s, early 2000s, and mid/late 2010s), fight corporate power (in the late 1990s/early 2000s, and late 2000s/early 2010s), and demand environmental justice (in the 1990s and 2010s), among other things.

Biden, Harris, and the Democrats as a party have, in fact, been particularly immobile on precisely the issues that have produced the most concerted action from the left in recent years: none has changed their concrete actions in the direction of movement aims on white supremacist state violence, rape culture, climate justice, and universal access to basic human needs like housing and healthcare.

If you think these records indicate good opponents, I've got a bridge in San Francisco to sell you. Cheap, of course – it's a fire sale.

## **MEASURE TWICE**

I offer that assessment from four years ago as an example of what the approach has to offer: a clear and reasonably simple way of assessing candidates and parties based on their actual histories and records,

not on hypothetical future actions, demographics as a substitute for politics, or whatever their proxies and publicists have decided to say this week. This can be remarkably useful, especially in local elections where progressive rhetoric often papers over a right-wing record, as it has for Democratic Party mayors across the country.

Four years later, after nearly a full presidential term of Biden and Harris holding office through two massive upsurges of our movements, we can see whether that advance evaluation was accurate. I'll use as a gauge the rubric Aurora Levins Morales proposes in her mid-2020 essay "Midnight in the Latrines", which she republished in June 2024: "We can push [Biden and Harris] to incorporate some of the proposals of the progressive campaigns [of Sanders and Warren] and put up a modicum of resistance to the pressure from the far right".

I take Levins Morales' "we" as meaning the groups committed to a "choose your opponent" approach in 2020, and perhaps the broader progressive 501c sphere who mobilized for Biden with some degree of explicitly "critical support" – almost all of which are now doing the same for Harris (though often being less vocal about the "critical" part). Assessing Biden and Harris as opponents of necessity includes assessing how those who declared themselves committed to pressuring them have done so – it is an assessment of a relationship; an opponent who isn't in actual practice pressured to change, and then doesn't, is not a "good opponent" in any way, just a successful one. A broader *we* of movement people has had four years to see what these groups' concrete practice has achieved, and we can say very definitively that not only has that "push" not succeeded, those who made it the center of their electioneering did not even bother to try.

Where Biden and Harris have continued Trump's policies, or made them worse – I'm thinking about immigrant detention, about supplying military materiel to police, about pipeline building and other extractive megaprojects driving climate change, about COVID policy during the past million-plus deaths from the still ongoing pandemic – there has been silence and inaction from the exact organizations that were most vocal in 2016-20. No mobilizations to block deportation flights. No coordinated actions – direct or symbolic – at immigrant detention centers. No collecting of Congressional candidate pledges to vote against further federal subsidies for police. No national campaigns targeting the FDA, CDC, federal HHS Department, or relevant congressional committees for meaningful public health responses to the ongoing pandemic. No mass mobilizations to support land and water defenders or extend their actions to the ports and refineries where the pipelines end. No escalation of any kind on any such issue.

Where Biden and Harris have done new awful things or used new opportunities to intervene in changed circumstances and make them worse – I'm thinking about the "states rights" and pro-religious-exemption approaches to trans health, about the absence of material support for abortion access since the Dobbs decision, about the Democrats' action to break the 2022 railroad workers strike (specifically, to prevent them from having paid sick leave), and, again, about COVID policy – there have been strongly worded statements, at most, and often milequetoast ones or (especially on COVID) nothing at all. Nothing has been deemed worthy of anything even dimly resembling the efforts taken in response to Trump's least concretely harmful actions. To give one very simple example: I have yet to hear any of the "choose your opponent" advocates so much as acknowledge that Harris has enthusiastically backed KOSA, a censorship bill (modeled on her signature SESTA/FOSTA law targeting sex workers) whose drafters and lead sponsors say its goal is to wipe trans people off the internet.

On Palestine, over these past eleven months of continuous genocidal massacre, there has been some direct bird-dogging directed at Biden and now Harris – with no results whatsoever. The “choose your opponent” groups have kept their participation (and their tone-setting efforts) basically confined to tactics that movement people have known for years or decades are ineffective: symbolic-arrest-based lobbying; strongly worded letters; promoting politicians who combine "pro-ceasefire" statements with solid track records of voting for military aid to Israel; etc. And those tactics have indeed been ineffective. Biden and Harris, and their party, have continuously reiterated their "unwavering" (in one recent phrasing from Harris) commitment to supporting the Israeli state, its genocide campaign against Palestinians, and its expansion of the slaughter of entire communities into Lebanon – and have backed their words up with hundreds of arms shipments, billions of dollars of military aid (which also subsidizes the U.S. arms industry), and enthusiastic rhetorical support that consistently retails documented falsehoods. And, again, where there has been any concrete escalation of resistance – or indeed any material resistance at all – it has come from outside the "choose your opponent" sphere.

Resisting pressure from the far right? Hardly. It's tough to think of an issue where Biden and Harris haven't embraced far-right talking points and policies. In particular, on the issues that the far right has placed at the center of their recent efforts, they've fully endorsed and enacted far right positions. I've just mentioned COVID, policing and incarceration, and funding the Israeli genocide. Border militarization and immigration policy are another particularly clear example, with Harris repeatedly criticizing Trump from the right – as she should, given the Democratic administration's record over the past four years. On trans issues, I've named KOSA already; other recent examples from Biden and Harris include cutting a provision of draft HHS rules that would have eliminated state bans on trans healthcare, and granting religious exemptions to Title IX protection against harassment. These procedural interventions not only achieve far-right goals, they use the specific mechanisms the far right prefers, entrenching them as available tools for further far right policy-making. Beyond these centerpiece issues, the picture is basically the same, with the changes between the Democratic Party's 2020 and 2024 platforms offering a whole raft of examples, including the removal of the longstanding anti-death-penalty plank and the addition of a full-throated threat to start a war with Iran.

And resistance to the far right itself? Biden and Harris have steadily continued to use rhetoric that encourages islamophobia and anti-Arab racism, and to give military hardware to the sheriffs' departments and police departments that are the core of the armed far right. All this while hedging about or endorsing overtly racist lies about Haitian immigrants (see below) and Palestinians (see above), refusing to obstruct widespread collaboration between cops (and military personnel) and 'civilian' far right groups, or to use the tools they routinely direct at left organizing to target the far right. For what this has meant to those who chose them as opponents, my bellwether is the progressive Jewish organizations. Some of them will now criticize the Anti-Defamation League for its racism and Zionism, but they continue to offer an analysis of antisemitism that's basically identical to the ADL's version, with varying quantities of either marxist or Reevaluation Counseling terminology smeared onto it. That depoliticizing model – viewing antisemitism on the one hand through a psychological/individual lens and on the other as a permanent and immutable structural force (and with both hands deemphasizing the far right to encourage witchhunts aimed left) – directly rejects and obstructs any meaningful strategic approach to combatting antisemitism, which has to start by looking at it as a political project.

And yes, if I can judge by my parochial NYC standards, all of that *is* these organizations treating Biden and Harris like opponents. For their politician *friends*, the "choose your opponent" 501Cs, at least where I live, don't just dismiss criticism as meaningless, "un-serious", or unhelpful, they make late-night phonecalls to try to stop people from even mentioning their actual legislative voting records in public (how do I know? I've gotten them).

I haven't seen any signs of the promised "push". I've seen even fewer signs of Harris or Biden moving in any direction but further right. If Levins Morales' rubric is how to judge a "good opponent", these two don't qualify.

## ALIBI

The complement to that core argument about pushability, again in Aurora Levins Morales' words, is that "our focus must be to build the strongest, most unified movement we can, to shift the thinking of a significant portion of our society in time to prevent the worst case scenarios for our futures."

This also has not happened. In fact, the "choose your opponent" NGO world has spent the past four years setting land speed records for abandoning solidarity and for inventing new forms of fake solidarity, with predictable results for the movements Levins Morales would have them working to strengthen and unify.

COVID is the prize example, of course, offering opportunities for the simultaneous abandonment of solidarity with disabled folks (often with loud rhetorical support for a limited, legalistic vision of disability rights, marketed under the phrase "disability justice"), incarcerated people, children, elders, and people targeted by colonial violence. Here in NYC, the "Care Not Cuts" anti-austerity campaign stands out for its mask-free superspreader rallies featuring transparently hypocritical rhetoric about "care".

But the same has been true across the board. Land back/decolonization efforts: lotsa land acknowledgments; damn little collaboration with indigenous radicals towards indigenous communities' goals; even less material support for land and water defense. Abolition work: lotsa name-checking Mariame Kaba right alongside backing prison- and police-expansionist politicians; in NYC (and echoed elsewhere), support for a massive jail expansion plan and the politicians who made it happen, reduced resources for concrete efforts like copwatch trainings, and dead silence about, for example, the "feminist jail" idea floated by a progressive 501c org. Feminist work: I think it's typical that I don't know of a single name-brand multi-issue progressive NGO that's mobilized its members for the key regular NYC clinic defense against escalating far-right Catholic attacks. Labor: the silence around the breaking of the railroad workers' strike has been deafening, despite its goals (mainly focused on health and safety, and sick leave in particular) being exactly the kind of industry-wide "raising the floor" demands that 501Cs claim to love most. I could go on.

Instead, we've seen steadily increasing amounts of resources poured into electoral work that brings NGOs deeper and deeper into their partnerships with the Democratic Party. Sometimes that's done through partnerships with the official party apparatus, sometimes with its internal opposition – which remains a part of the party (that's what makes it internal!), no matter the politics of the opposition faction in a particular place may be<sup>3</sup>.

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3 Personally, for local election information, I rely on the voter guides from New Kings Democrats, the current Brooklyn anti-machine project – but they remain a constituent element of the party, just not beholden to the machine.

All of this is despite having clear models for other ways to do electoral work which do not present the same pitfalls. The successes of the “Chicago model”, in particular the #ByeAnita campaign, demonstrate that a purely negative approach to electoral work, refusing on principle to anoint any candidate as “good” or even “better”, can have material effects that no candidate-supporting campaign has achieved. By contrast (sticking to Chicago), the 501c world’s anointed Best Possible Candidate, sitting Mayor Brandon Johnson, hasn’t even been willing to hold police funding flat at the levels set by his overtly right-wing predecessor Lori Lightfoot’s budget increases; he added even more money to the CPD budget before he’d been in office a year.

And we’ve seen constant attempts to marginalize, discredit, and dismiss critics and critiques of alignment with the Democratic Party, of electoralism, and of the state as a structure from the parts of the left who see themselves as threatened by analytic attention to their specific tactics, stated broader strategies, or larger political vision. To show how this operates beyond the electoral sphere, here’s one example of an effort targeting those with a different overall vision: Interrupting Criminalization’s “discussion tool” on the state and abolition is a masterclass in how to do ideological cleansing work through deliberate framing and question-asking, starting with its silent change of subject from the state as such to the nation-state<sup>4</sup>; far right figures from Socrates and Plato to their online “just asking questions” descendants could learn a lot from it. Plenty of other examples can be found by looking at what elements of Atlanta’s Stop Cop City fight various NGOs have selected to highlight, ignore, and distance themselves from, no matter how many times Atlanta organizers repeat that its strength has been in its embrace of a genuine diversity of tactics and its refusal to disavow any tactical approach – and especially by looking at how quickly electoralist 501Cs stopped talking about Cop City in *any* concrete or up-to-date way after Democratic Party politicians blocked the 2023 referendum effort.

As far as I can tell, Levins Morales’ goal of a “widely endorsed plan for a broad, unified surge of organizing, around a clear and simple set of shared principles and goals [...] decentralized enough to allow a big range of diverse strategies and local initiatives [with] a strategy for organizing white working class people” – let alone one with “a vision of climate justice based on dismantling the existing world economy and creating universal social justice, with a bold list of interim goals” – is significantly farther away now than it was in 2020, precisely because of the actual reality of what 501Cs have done under the cover of their “choose your opponent” rhetoric.

## BY CONTRAST

After that extended exploration, it may be useful to take a very quick look at a contrasting case to illustrate what a “good opponent” can actually look like. Luckily, there’s an easy one ready to hand: the Republican Party has been an ideal opponent for the far right for nearly a century. Its politicians have shifted the core of their platforms steadily further from the anti-slavery – and often anti-racist – politics that brought the party to life, first to an actively colonial militarist and anti-communist doctrine in the mid-twentieth-century, and then to explicit white supremacy by the 1960s (the so-called “Southern Strategy”). At present, the party retains only a scattering of politicians who even bother to express distaste for the far right – just enough to function as a stalking horse for bipartisan legislation towards

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4 Which is not only an evasion of structural critique of the state – which applies equally to nation-states, empires, caliphates, peoples’ democracies, herrenvolk republics, and constitutional monarchies – but also places the focus on a model that does not apply to the state in which IC works. While the U.S. certainly is in practice a state created by and for white christians, and has at times sought to create a unitary white christian nation within its imperial core, it is not a conventional nation-state by any commonly-used definition. In fact, the contemporary movements within the U.S. most committed to the project of a nation-state – the groups that make up the white nationalist far right – are the ones most insistent on the necessity of completely restructuring the U.S. state in order to make that possible.



far-right goals. That's what a good opponent, faced with many years of actual political pressure, ends up looking like.

## II. EXCAVATION

### FUNDAMENTALS

Nonetheless, "choose your opponent" needs a closer look – the fact that taking it seriously on its own terms doesn't reflect well on its advocates' favored candidates doesn't tell us much about it itself. Digging into the premises behind it can help us understand some important things about the organizing approach that helped the slogan and approach surge across the progressive political landscape.

The "choose your opponent" approach has a very clear understanding of how social change can be accomplished. It closely matches the model of organizing publicized by the followers of Saul Alinsky, which has become increasingly dominant in progressive U.S. NGOs over the last thirty years. For this school of thought, the basic litany is "identify the person or institution who has the power to give you what you want, then figure out how to pressure them into doing it." Everything else flows from this, through influence-mapping and ladders of tactical escalation. The dominance of the Alinsky organizing model in NGOs – many of them chimeras with recently-created 501(c)4 electoral wings grafted onto longstanding 501(c)3 organizations – has spurred on the "choose your opponent" argument in the past two presidential election cycles. From their perspective, backing "good opponents" in electoral contests is a self-evidently good strategy.

Even a small step outside that perspective, however, is revelatory. This is a model that is based entirely on affecting the actions of those already in power. For it to be effective, it **depends on** "the power to give you what you want" remaining where it is. At most, it can envision changing what individual is in the position of power. The power of the position *must* remain, because otherwise your opponent cannot "give you" anything.

At best, the victories this approach can win will leave the structures that provide that power unchanged (and so able to reverse any victory); often those "wins" expand the reach of those structures' power. It is a model that has no way of creating structural change of any kind, except where the change serves to further entrench current power-holders or the power of their positions, or where the change is unimportant enough that those benefiting most from the current structures can comfortably enact it. When proponents of this model talk about "building power", they are not talking about cultivating the ability to accomplish things directly, outside of or in opposition to existing structures, or the ability to build new structures. Those possibilities are excluded by their model. They are talking about the ability to affect the actions of those in power, while leaving their power intact.<sup>5</sup>

The same principle is at work in the other half of the core Alinsky doctrine, which addresses how organizing should be done. Here, too, the core commitment is to preserving existing structures of power. Alinsky insisted that organizing should be professionalized and centralized – never left in the collective hands of the people most directly affected by the issues it focuses on, never based in horizontal or participatory decisionmaking processes, and always contained within a formal organization or a centralized coalition of formal organizations rather than a movement encompassing

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5 The distinction here partly tracks the difference between "potencia" and "poder" in latin american autonomist thought; this translators' introduction to writing by Colectivo Situaciones goes into that difference in more detail: <https://ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/5-4holdren-touza.pdf>

multiple structures for activity. His strategy guidebook, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*<sup>6</sup>, constantly reinforces the idea that accurate analysis and dictate effective strategies can only come from an outside eye (potentially including people from within a community who have had the proper training to give them an abstract/objective – not to say deracinated or colonized – perspective), as opposed to emerging from any form of collective self-organization.

These days, 501C staffs are often demographically similar to the constituencies whose interests they claim to serve, but they remain, in general, "outsiders" quite distinct from the people they speak for in the concrete factors: educational credentials (meaning both the college or graduate degrees demanded in NGO hiring processes, and their disciplining through professional organizing training, as pioneered by Alinsky's Urban Areas Foundation), class position (even given the gentrification wages 501Cs typically pay), and ongoing material experience of the relevant issues. The structure of NGOs ensures that this staff will remain in control of any meaningful decisionmaking, even (from my 25 years of experience, I would say *especially*) when it is ratified through a formally open process.

No wonder contemporary Alinskyites have made "build organizations, not movements" into a refrain.

That is what "choose your opponent" has behind it. The idea that our strategies should be directed towards putting into power an "opponent" who will make only the concessions that are compatible with maintaining the structures that keep them in power. That the goal of our movements should be not structural change but an embrace of the existing structures of power. That all we need is what those in power can be persuaded to "give" us. That multiple organizing structures with varied priorities, differing forms, and disparate tactical approaches cannot work together on a common liberatory goal (except, perhaps, if they are subordinated to a centralized authority). That oppressed communities cannot be trusted to collectively shape their own liberation.

## **SOME ARE BRAVE**

It is not coincidental that the most vital parts of the U.S. left over the past several decades have been the ones where this perspective has been rejected in practice.

That rejection has been most visible in the Chicago school of abolitionist organizing that I've mentioned already (for example: the #ByeAnita and We Charge Genocide campaigns; Assata's Daughters; Just Practice; Project NIA; Young Womens Empowerment Project; etc), but is central to all transformative justice work and runs through the grassroots parts of the Black Lives Matter upsurge and abolition movement. Similarly, it has been the common thread among the most significant parts of the climate justice movement, from indigenous land and water defense campaigns (Standing Rock, Wet'suwe'ten, etc) to mutual aid efforts like Occupy Sandy and the currently ongoing hurricane relief in Appalachia. And the Stop Cop City campaign in Atlanta and beyond, which has brought together all of these strains<sup>7</sup>, is a perfect example of the opposite approach, building a movement rather than an organization, through a loose assemblage of self-organized projects with a shared goal and radically different tactics and forms.

In the labor movement as well, the wildcat strikes and rank-and-file insurgencies that have revitalized (in particular) teachers' unions across the country are based on exerting direct control over education systems, insisting on bargaining over 'unconnected' issues, and, often, on insisting that current workers

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6 Really. I not only couldn't've made it up, I had completely forgotten that the book had a subtitle at all.

7 Within, it's worth noting, an overall campaign approach rooted in the model developed by the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) militant animal rights campaign.

rather than union staff should get to directly decide what unions do. Every meaningful piece of COVID organizing and mutual aid has come from self-organized collectives outside the 501c system and its approach. The lifesaving work of projects like Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, Appalachian Medical Solidarity, Lobelia Commons, and many more are similarly driven by a refusal of the fantasy of the state as a source of safety or support. And even though the most visible demands have often been for legislation (importantly, most centrally legislation repealing current criminalizing laws), the growing strength of undocumented worker & youth organizing, trans organizing, and sex worker organizing has come from local projects like Centro Corona, GLITS, and Whose Corner Is It Anyway?, which work to build communities' ability to meet their own needs directly, rather than through existing structures of power.

These are the kinds of projects that are driving justice movements in the U.S., and have made recent years' upsurges of militancy and deepening of mutual aid possible. And that has been precisely because they do not share the premises that "choose your opponent" and the progressive non-profit industry's Alinskyite approach to organizing rely on, and have not followed the strategies that grow from those premises.

## PAYING ATTENTION

To cultivate the possibilities of the current moment, we need to take seriously and learn to talk directly about the organizing approaches that our movements use. Organizing models have different premises, and different roots and histories – and they matter, not just as different ways to pursue a goal, but as radically different ways of imagining what a goal can be. Catch-phrases like "choose your opponent" often make those differences easier to understand, if we take them seriously enough to think through their implications<sup>8</sup>. And understanding the differences is the first step towards making real choices about how we work together and what we are trying to do.

As Keguro Macharia has written in contexts that go far beyond this essay: we need to always be asking *how* we are imagining freedom, and *how* we are practicing freedom.

One important place to do that, with the "choose your opponents" approach as elsewhere, is to look beyond its overt claims and its practical implications, which I've been talking about so far, to the specific political and ethical logics that it appeals to.

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8 And, I believe, their histories. It's beyond the scope of this piece, but I think "choose your opponent" is just the latest articulation of a lineage of left electoralism that goes back a century, if not further. I see parallels to the CPUSA's decisive shift in the early 1940s (with a few later exceptions, like the Henry Wallace campaign) to align electorally with the Democrats, who led HUAC and its predecessors and passed the Smith Act, as well as stifling the Double-V campaign and other left initiatives. Arguably, the same logics can be seen in 19th-century electoralist abolitionists' support for the openly racist Lincoln, who backed the "colonization" (i.e. mass deportation) approach to the future of African-Americans that the abolitionist movement had long since rejected, and did not even support immediate or uncompensated emancipation. More recent examples in this tradition – with farce following tragedy, as usual – include the reconciliation of many involved in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party with the Democrats after the party's refusal to seat the racially mixed MFDP delegation at the 1964 convention (instead embracing an explicitly white supremacist delegation), and the transformation of many onetime members of the 2000 agitprop group Billionaires for Bush or Gore into avowed supporters of the Democratic Party four years later as Billionaires for Bush.

To my eye, these all embody a basically unchanged repertoire of rationalizations by progressives and sometime radicals for abandoning their stated politics and principles in the interest of supporting candidates and parties that have directly attacked them and opposed those very politics and principles. That first move has been consistently followed by a steady slide into irrelevance, often sped along by further repression led by the party that the original betrayal of principle was intended to support.

### III. EXPLORATION

#### TOUCHING FEELING

The appeal of "choose your opponent" isn't its rational arguments. If it were, nobody would ever have tried to attach it to Harris or Biden. But the elements of it that present themselves as emotional appeals – the things every defender of the approach falls back on when it's challenged on its own pragmatic terms – are not simply the scare tactics they present themselves as.

Aurora Levins Morales phrases the centerpiece of that appeal this way, describing Trump: "he's dangerous and can do a tremendous amount of harm, and kill a lot of people".

It's possible (and perfectly accurate) to respond to this by focusing on the fright factor, and pointing out how it makes a false comparison by glossing over the ways that Biden and Harris have done, are doing, and will do massive, murderous harm (on a scale far beyond Trump, if we look at their whole careers).

But that's a response premised on pragmatism. And what's going on here isn't about that; this is the part of the argument that's made specifically when the pragmatics of "choose your opponent" have been challenged, or have been used to rebut the conclusion its advocates are arguing for. This is about a specific ethical and political logic being used to motivate feelings.

This is a request that we prioritize a (very real) *threat* of harm and violence towards constituencies that haven't been as directly targeted over the past four (or, in many cases eight) years over the *actual ongoing* harm, violence, and death currently affecting other groups of people.

We're being told to vote against the *threat* of violence towards married middleclass white homosexuals (and some other palatable 'gender/sexual minorities') – and for a party that has actively collaborated in, promoted, and refused to meaningfully oppose, a massive array of accelerating legal and physical attacks on trans women of color, sex workers, and other less respectable sex and gender deviants. I've already mentioned SESTA/FOSTA and KOSA a few times; it's worth repeating that Biden and Harris' practical embrace of a states-rights model (familiar to Biden from his segregationist days) and religious exemptions for all things trans-related make any federal-level policies they could enact, however good, completely irrelevant.

We're being told to vote against the *threat* of violence towards U.S. Jews – and for a party that is enthusiastically funding and providing political cover for the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Palestine by a state that does so, according to this same party, as the sole legitimate representative of the world's Jews; for a party that is actively participating in accelerating (and increasingly violent) attacks on Palestinians and anti-genocide organizers (including anti-Zionist Jews) here; for a party that has done nothing in response to actual christian nationalist violence against Jews except increase its support for genocidal Zionist organizations. And, to be clear: a party and candidate that enthusiastically endorses and funds assassination-by-carpet-bombing and other forms of assassination-by-massacre as a way of dealing with political opponents elsewhere in the world will use that tactic at home as well – West Philadelphia, Attica, and plenty of other places in the U.S. still have the scars to prove it.

We're being told to vote against the broad *threat* of explicit white nationalism – and for a party that has enthusiastically embraced all manner of eugenic policies and logics in its worse-than-

denialist response to a pandemic that is currently killing about a thousand people a week in this country alone; for a party that supports in its platform and has worked vigorously to enact the anti-immigrant and border-militarization programme of the white nationalist movement, killing (directly and by eliminating safe migration routes), incarcerating, and deporting huge numbers of people (mainly black and latine). And, again, to be clear: it's striking that while Harris denounced the lies about Haitian residents of Springfield, Ohio, that Trump took directly from neo-Nazi organizers, she could not manage to name them as racism<sup>9</sup>, as xenophobia, or even as coming from neo-Nazis.

Most obviously, this demand is a duplicate of white nationalism's appeal to white fear, of Zionism's appeal to Jewish fear, of the anti-trans movement's appeal to cis women's fear, of the anti-vaccination movement's appeal to parental fear. It's been a fantastically successful approach for the far right for decades, but that's not a reason to adopt it.

More significantly, to me, it marks out very clearly a specific attitude towards human lives: some matter, and others don't. Tens or hundreds of thousands of Palestinian dead are an acceptable exchange for the relative safety of well-off gays and shul-going Jews. Tens or hundreds of thousands of disabled lives, of migrants' lives on either side of the U.S. border, are an acceptable exchange for averting the possibility that Democratic Party elected officials will face violence from the cops and soldiers they've bent over backward to fund, arm, and defend.

The lives of the people whose bodies are designated as sacrifice zones – millions of already un-humaned people in this country, and hundreds upon hundreds of millions more elsewhere in the world – are an acceptable price for protecting specific slices of the U.S. population from fear. Not from the *actual* concrete threats of state or social violence, which the Democratic Party has done nothing to address in the past four years (or the past forty), and a great deal to heighten – but from the fear of being treated as they've allowed and encouraged the far right and the state to treat trans women of color, sex workers, disabled folks, Palestinians, indigenous communities, and everyone else whose deaths are deemed an acceptable price.

That's the political and ethical logic behind telling people that it's thinking like a proper internationalist to vote for a candidate and party that have spent twelve months (and 76 years) actively funding, arming, and loudly defending a genocide. It's not destroying the village in order to save it, it's razing Gaza to keep brunch safe.

None of this should have any place in any movement for liberation.

## STAKES

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9 Various journalists have taken it upon themselves to add that specificity into their account of Harris' WHYY interview on the subject. NPR, for example, has Harris objecting in an indirect quotation to "lies rooted in racist tropes", rewriting and radically improving her actual depoliticizing words – "lies that are grounded in tropes that are age old" – which removed the incitement to white supremacist violence from the realm of the political or historical spheres that can be affected by human action, into the genocide-apologist fiction of "age-old hatreds". The immediate context of that line matters, too: it did not follow Harris' mild expression of grief ("a crying shame") for the effects on the Haitian community of Springfield, but was part of her attack on Trump for not caring enough about cops. Police (and military personnel, like the leaders of the neo-Nazi Blood Tribe who originated the attacks in Springfield) are key constituencies for the U.S. far right, consistently (and entirely legally) refusing while on the job to protect communities against exactly these kinds of white supremacist violence. Using her most forceful phrase condemning this kind of incitement as a hook to argue for *more* support for police is as vile as it is predictable from Harris.

Or, to say all of that much more concisely:

I'm in several demographic categories that will put me under threat if Trump has a second term. I'm not interested in buying my marginal safety with Palestinian blood.

Are you?

#### IV. EXCURSION

### THE PARABLE OF THE LATRINES

Before I go on to the other, distinct but closely related, structure of political logic that appears almost every time someone defends "choose your opponent", it's important to name the ways that its defenders relate to our movements' history. They constantly appeal to it, in search of precedents to justify their position, and of a certain kind of moral authority to sway listeners who don't find their arguments from pragmatism to be persuasive when tested. The conclusions we're told to draw from these stories rarely hold up; often the stories themselves don't either. Aurora Levins Morales provides a very telling example in the anecdote that she named her essay "Midnight in the Latrines" after.

As she tells the story, the German Communist Party (KPD), still active within a Nazi internment camp, proposed unanimously voting *for* the NSDAP's policy of withdrawing Germany from the League of Nations in a 1933 referendum, on the theory that this vote in support of their political enemies' program could send a message to people outside the camps that they could not participate freely in the election. She writes: "In those camps where the communists persuaded their co-inmates to join them, the strategy succeeded. People outside the camps understood that the levels of repression were a lot worse than they'd been told." We are to learn from and follow their example: "They were able to stay focused on how to have as much of an impact as they could, given the extremely limiting reality they faced."

This is not the story as it's told in the book she cites as her source. At all.

But for now, let's pretend that it is, and assess it as it's presented.

What is the success here? What is the impact? What is the goal?

The success? Even if we accept that some meaningful number of people learned something they didn't already know about the level of repression political prisoners under a dictatorship face, what did that **do**? Did it change the fact that they, like these political prisoners, lived under a far-right dictatorship? Did it move people to actively, physically, resist that dictatorship?

There's no reason to think so. But there's plenty of reason to doubt it. A message that repression is worse than you thought, that the only political party that had consistently offered physical resistance to the Nazis<sup>10</sup> can only act by voting *for* their policies, is not one that mobilizes people – it is a message of futility.

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10 There was other physical resistance, but not from political parties. The Social Democratic Party (SDP; more on them below), who saw the KPD as their main competitor, sponsored a paramilitary organization, but barred it from actually fighting Nazis until *after* the NSDAP was in power. Some members (and likely some units) refused to honor the ban, but the SDP did not support them in any way. Even after Hitler took power, the SDP-led Iron Front (whose mandate lumped together as its enemies the Communist-led Antifascist Action paramilitary and the Nazi Stormtroopers) ordered its members *not* to participate in a general strike against the regime called by the KPD.

And that matches what we know of that awful year: there was massive discontent with the Nazi regime that winter, but it was not political unrest driven by internal resistance organizing. The rumblings that had the newborn NSDAP government on the verge of collapse were economic, driven by the steady growth of the external campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions. The growing unrest lasted until the umbrella Zionist Organization, led by David Ben Gurion's Labor Zionists, made a deal with the Nazis to undermine Jewish support for the boycott (in the U.S, in particular), in exchange for being allowed to use money stolen from German Jews to buy agricultural equipment from German companies for their failing citrus farms in Palestine. The deal was a success for both parties: the Zionist intervention kept the Nazis in power and helped rebuild the heavy machinery plants that their war machine would rely on, and the colonial project in Palestine got its tractors.<sup>11</sup>

The impact? Under circumstances like these, any electoral result the regime doesn't bother to change is a result that the regime is fine with. And that means a result that cannot threaten its hold on power. And why on earth would it feel threatened?

On the most basic level: Why would anyone would anyone believe the results were real in the first place? We're talking about a transparently coercive and basically symbolic referendum on an already announced policy in a far-right dictatorship, and about votes being cast by incarcerated people – it doesn't take a sophisticated political mind to understand that you can't trust the result no matter what it is. And that's equally true for a completely genuine result, for a faked-by-the-state result, for a faked-by-the-voters result, and for a faked-by-the-voters-to-be-identical-to-a-faked-by-the-state result.

The goal? If everyone who you could conceivably reach already knows the results can't be believed, and what they see will be the same fake result no matter what, whether you provide the result the regime wants or make the regime manufacture that same result, why save your enemies work? Why refuse the path that could leave a trace of interference or resistance to be found – if not at the time of the vote, then in the future. If you have the ability to act unanimously as a bloc, why not abstain or spoil your ballots? Why not toss a match, or a cigarette, into the ballot box?

## **ELECTORALISTS FOR HISTORICAL REVIEW**

But, more importantly, let's step back a little bit. Even if we keep ignoring the thorough misrepresentation of the story itself for a while longer, this is some pretty wild historical cherry-picking that amounts to a massive erasure of – and I think incredible disrespect for – the way that German Communists dealt with electoral politics.

What we are offered is an example of a single tactical choice in a basically meaningless referendum after the NSDAP had already taken power and banned the KPD. Why should it guide us, rather than the consistent, explicit strategy that these same Communists pursued for the entire period they were involved in electoral work – as one of the largest parties in the parliament – before the Nazi regime was established? That, after all, is the situation parallel to ours, as today's electoralist leftists describe it: a series of elections in which a significant number of leftist voters are seeking a strategy to deny fascists victory. So what was the KPD's strategy, when it came to the largest party in German politics, the liberal electoral powerhouse of interwar Europe, the Social Democratic Party (SDP)?

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11 This is a quick summary of the account given by Edwin Black in his book *The Transfer Agreement* (endorsed by the ADL's Abe Foxman), which thinks the deal was a great idea.

The KPD's years of massive, rapid growth in membership and electoral strength, from 1920 to 1932, were defined by its refusal (with some local and regional exceptions) to collaborate with the Social Democratic Party. This wasn't capricious, or even all that much about ideology.

It was a refusal, based on concrete experience, to align with a party that had commissioned far-right paramilitaries to massacre tens of thousands of leftists in the years right after World War I (when the SDP controlled the government), and continued whenever it was part of (or externally supporting) the ruling coalition, throughout the life of the Weimar Republic, to collaborate with the right and violently suppress the left. The KPD's most seemingly intransigent rhetoric about the SDP, calling them "social fascists", was proved to be simply accurate in 1933, when the guy the SDP backed for President (because he was supposedly the only one who could stop Hitler) appointed Hitler as Chancellor. Hitler, of course, being the head of a party whose backbone was veterans of the Freikorps, the same far-right paramilitaries the SDP had given state backing fourteen years earlier.

I'm not crazy about the KPD for many reasons. I wish we had gotten to see the very different beast it would've become after 1919 if the SDP hadn't sent the Freikorps to kill Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and thousands of others who shared their vision of what a revolution could be, and what a world our movements make could become.

But it's hard not to understand that the KPD's approach should be taken very seriously when considering the question of whether to support a nominally progressive party that when solidly in power launches a counter-insurgency campaign to murder and jail its way to the defeat of a massively popular set of liberation movements, and then while shifting between more tenuous rule and friendly opposition maintains a consistent hostility to the left while consolidating executive power, extending police powers, and doing little (besides vacillating between willed ignorance, practical support, and frantic fearmongering) to limit the rise of far right militancy.

The "chose your opponent" advocates say we should back them. The KPD refused.

Talking about German Communists' approach to electoral questions without mentioning any of that is at best lying by omission. Presenting an incoherent tactical choice seized on – once and once only – in a moment of desperation following thorough defeat, as if it represented their movement's approach, is just plain lying.

And that's assuming the account Levins Morales gives is accurate. Which it is not.

## **NO SEX, NO VIDEOTAPE**

Let's come back to the fact that the story of a disciplined, rational, self-effacing strategic decision made by a Communist Party maintaining unity despite incarceration is simply not true.

What Paul Massing (under the pen name Karl Billinger) actually wrote in his 1935 book *Fatherland* (pp.182-194) centers on a detailed account of a debate in his prison camp between Communist advocates of a No vote and Communist advocates of a Yes vote on withdrawal from the League of Nations in the 1933 referendum – a debate that did not come to any resolution or decision. He relays the various arguments as direct quotations, as if giving a transcript of the meeting; the words Levins Morales places in quotation marks in her essay are nowhere among them.



That's not the only detail that's rewritten. To illustrate how thorough the revision is, Massing tells us the meeting was "the evening of November 11" (p.185). Where I live, that's not "Midnight". It was, however, "in the Latrines".<sup>12</sup>

The day after the meeting, an idea spread among the prisoners that the Communist Party, outside the camp, had officially ordered a Yes vote. Massing never calls this anything but a rumor, and implies it was started by a prison administration stoolie. He refers briefly to failed attempts, presumably by the Communists within the camp, to "counteract" it (p.191). Levins Morales, in contrast, spreads the rumor as fact.

The announced results of the referendum vote in his camp, which Massing seems to accept as accurate, were 65% Yes, 13% No, and 22% blank; he says this pleased the camp administration. The results announced later from other camps, which he expresses skepticism about, were 85-90% Yes. He first implies that the contrast caused the administration to increase repression within the camp, but then says the actual cause of their ire was ballots turned in with slogans in support of the KPD and its paramilitary organization.

The only effect of the vote outside the walls of the camp that Massing describes is an announcement in the Nazi press that a large number of political prisoners would be released very soon "in recognition of the excellent spirit displayed in the balloting" (p.194). On Christmas, seven weeks later, Massing was one of just 58 prisoners released out of over 700 held at his camp; in the meantime 90 more had arrived. If the vote sent a message to the NSDAP regime, it was such a reassuring one that they felt no need to even follow through with the promised reward; if it sent a message to anyone else, Massing didn't know about it.

And, even more importantly, sending a message to those outside the walls is not a significant part of the debate Massing describes. The idea is mentioned by the first speaker advocating for a Yes vote, but never raised again. It gets far less attention in the discussion than the idea that a Yes vote would be the correct way to follow the general Communist line opposing the League of Nations. Contrary to what Levins Morales writes, the KPD had actively advocated *for* Germany leaving the League – another reason no observer could have perceived any message in the prisoners' Yes votes.

The knee-jerk abstract radicalism that Levins Morales presents in the quotation she invented for the advocates of a No vote, on the other hand, is simply nowhere to be found in Massing's account. Instead, their key argument is a rational and strategic one:

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12 Why falsify this particular detail? "Sunset at the Latrines" is just as evocative, right? I think it's actually about what it's meant to evoke: emphasizing the sensory impact by adding darkness to stench, doubling down on the latrines themselves as an image of horror. This isn't something Massing does. He never portrays the latrines (which appear regularly throughout his book) as holding any special horror. His tone about them is determinedly neutral, like a highschool student talking about the best bathroom for sharing a joint with a buddy or my friends in rural Tennessee describing herbal work in the apothecary room above the main outhouse – it may stink, but it's where you can do the necessary thing, so why harp on it?

Levins Morales, I think, wants us to feel the opposite, to be viscerally repulsed. But whose repulsion is that? I remember one of my first housemates pointing out to me that if I wasn't doing my share of the bathroom chores, it meant she was cleaning up my shit and I wasn't cleaning up hers – with that ethical imperative in mind, I got over any distaste for scrubbing the toilet pretty fast. "Midnight in the Latrines" evokes the repulsion that comes with unquestioned comfort and dissipates rapidly if you're in actual regular contact with filth. I doubt Levins Morales, with her rural background, experiences that repulsion; that she expects her readers to, however, says a lot about who she imagines she's writing for – and who she's trying to encourage to think of themselves as heroic, disciplined protagonists of revolutionary struggle.

"Every comrade who doesn't know his own mind, every coward, everyone who wants to follow the line of least resistance, will take shelter behind these instructions of yours to vote Yes. And to plenty of them this first vote for Hitler — though you label it tactics a hundred times over — will be a starting point, so that next time they'll vote Yes without any tactics. Instead of keeping them in the Party and strengthening their class consciousness you're driving them into the camp of the fascists." (p.190)

The actual central argument from advocates of a Yes vote was that there was no way to get a 100% negative vote, and that a mixed vote would let the Nazis assess the political makeup of the camp, and possibly (depending on the technical details of ballot collection) identify individual resisters. To me, this is quite compelling, based as it is on the concrete conditions in the camp, and the priorities that come from organizing resistance within them — but it appears nowhere in Levins Morales' fictionalized version of the story.

Nor does the fact that Massing himself spoke for a No vote in the debate. He does not, however, tell us what he ultimately wrote on his ballot, which may indicate that he does not think the decision was, in the end, particularly significant.<sup>13</sup>

### III. EXPLORATION

#### THE HAUNTING SPECTER

What work does this misrepresentation of a distinctly un-influential event do? What work does this erasure of an influential organization's entire strategic approach to the electoral sphere do?

It presents a very specific political logic, by painting a very precisely chosen double portrait. The fictionalized Communists of 1933 are presented as exemplars of proper political practice, spotlighted to show us in their negative image the collective face of the critics of alignment with the Democratic Party, the critics of electoralism, the critics of embracing the state as a path to liberation.

Here are Levins Morales' words about the Communists as she has rewritten them:

"strategists"  
"weren't distracted"  
"able to stay focused"

And her words on the approach we are told to follow, modeled on theirs:

"use [your outrage] strategically"

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13 It's not relevant to the trustworthiness of this account, published in 1935, but it seems important to include here what Levins Morales omits in her description of Paul Massing as simply a "German communist sociologist". Like many Communists, Massing became increasingly critical of the U.S.S.R. over the course of the 1930s — in his case sped along by his experience (along with his wife, Hede) operating as an informant for the NKVD and barely managing to secure an exit visa when visiting Moscow during the Great Purge of 1937-8. Unlike most who stepped away from Stalinism, however, he and Hede became active informants for the FBI after emigrating to the U.S., giving scores of names in over a dozen interview sessions during 1947-8, and becoming friendly witnesses in front of HUAC in 1948. Hede went on to be the star witness in the prosecution of Alger Hiss; Paul never played an equally high-profile public role in the Second Red Scare meatgrinder he fed his former comrades into. For more detail on all this, see the research presented on The Nation Institute's *The Alger Hiss Story* website: <https://algerhiss.com/history/the-hiss-case-the-1940s/the-witnesses/the-hede-massing-story/>

"purpose"  
"affect some of the terms"  
"thoughtful, strategic"  
"never confused about what was at stake"  
"based on the big picture"  
"honest with ourselves"  
"let go of our dreams"

What we see are paragons of rationality and discipline, able to look away from the dishonesty of distractions and dreams to concentrate on the art of the possible, to subordinate the personal and emotional to a strategy based on clear-eyed evaluation and analytic pragmatism, to make the unfortunately necessary hard choices whatever they may cost and however little they may accomplish.

Here, in contrast, are Levins Morales' words fleshing out the inverse picture, describing those she is arguing against:

"disappointment"  
"outrage"  
"reaction"  
"heartbreak, discouragement, and fury"  
"a big hope disappointed"  
"emotional backlash"  
"highly emotional reactive"  
"wishful thinking"  
"reacted emotionally"  
"based on how the strategy would make them feel about themselves"  
"what would make them feel righteous and principled and brave"  
"distracted by what they wished their conditions allowed"  
"dreams"

This is an equally familiar image. It is the archetypal portrait of the hysteric, as drawn in fin-de-siècle (pseudo)psychology: emotionally driven, unrealistic, fueled by fantasy, childish, self-centered, purely reactive, unreliable, and (in the current leftist catchphrase) "un-serious".

It is the polar opposite of the manly virtues of the perfected professional revolutionary or party cadre<sup>14</sup> that she so eloquently depicted opposite it. The pairing is transparently gendered and raced, with the 150-year tradition of liberal criminology from Lombroso to the present allying the diagnosis of hysteria to racial pseudoscience and to pseudoscientific misogyny, within the overall framework of eugenics.

## NAMES

But hysteria is also very specifically a political diagnosis. And it is a very specific political diagnosis.

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14 Or, indeed, the Freikorps officers whose mentality, as seen in their autobiographical writings, Karl Theweleit lays out with crystalline precision in his indispensable *Male Fantasies*. The negative image I've glossed as "the hysteric" appears there too, as that which their state-deployed violence seeks to forcefully eradicate – depicted in their words through images of the "women / floods / bodies" of Theweleit's first volume's subtitle. Similarly, the sensations that Levins Morales evokes through her revision of an evening gathering into "Midnight at the Latrines" are precisely the ones that serve as shorthand, in this fascist mindset, for what is to be avoided or eradicated at all cost – the opposite of the clean and rational discipline that her essay advocates.

For Lombroso, for the legislators who passed the U.S. Immigration Act of 1903, for the eugenicist movement, for the author of "*Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*", precisely the same traits that define the hysteric also define those who critique the state as a structure for organizing human life. Anarchism, for all of them, is a psychological class rather than a movement or a framework for social analysis. And for all of them, like the others targeted as inherently "hysterical" – sex workers, girls complaining about sexual assault, epileptics, others carrying mental health diagnoses, trans women, drug users, dykes and faggots, black women with opinions, unhoused people discontented with the conditions of their lives, indigenous communities operating based on their own reference points, young people who won't hide their rage, devotional enthusiasts outside the dominant religions, colonized people insufficiently grateful for their condition – those who oppose the state as a structure cannot be genuine political subjects.

It is no coincidence that the people I see being the most critical of calls from the left to shut up and vote for genocide generally fall into at least one of these categories. Or that these categories make up the social sacrifice zones whose deaths are justified in the name of preserving others from fear. Or that these are the groups whose anarchistic<sup>15</sup> practice has been the beating heart of the most vibrant and effective movements in the U.S. for the past three decades (and beyond).

Excluding them – us – from the field of the "serious" left, and indeed from the definition of politics itself, is an imperative to be enforced with ridicule, with dismissal, with outright lies and historical falsification. With everything except the words that make the pattern visible: names are too powerful. Descriptions like Levins Morales' deploy every trope available to invoke the specter haunting them, but cannot bring themselves to be honest enough to make the accusation of hysteria directly. More than that: they cannot even admit that what they are arguing against, at heart, is a *politics* that has a name and a history.

That refusal, that reliance on indirect accusations, is also a confession. It is an indication that the advocates of "choose your opponent" don't trust their strategic arguments to stand on their own, and aren't willing to make an argument based explicitly on either the ideological stance they're pushing or the political and ethical logics of their approach. We should not trust those strategic arguments more than the people who make them do.

I would like to believe that it is also an indication that they don't believe the lines they're selling. That they know that a politics that values above all else the exaltation of disciplined rationality, the imperative to replace your own dreams with pragmatic equations, the axiomatic centrality of the state, the transcendent importance of seriousness, is also a politics that has a name.

That name is fascism. And its logic is the logic of sacrifice zones, the logic of believing that you get to choose which lives matter and which threats matter more than which lives, the logic of deciding that you can determine who is a genuine political subject and who may be disregarded. Its logic is buying safety with blood.

## STAKES

I'll say it again.

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15 I'm following Cindy Baruch Milstein and others in using "anarchistic" to describe the broad field of anti-state political practice that contemporary anarchism lives within (and is not at the center of), alongside, among others, the indigenous and Black political lineages traced and embodied by Klee Benally, William C. Anderson, Zoe Samudzi, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, Ashanti Alston, Kai Lumumba Barrow, Modibo Kadalie, and many others.

I'm in several demographic categories that will put me under threat if Trump has a second term. I'm not interested in the fantasy that I can buy safety from those threats with Palestinian blood. With the blood of my Black neighbors, friends, and comrades. With the blood of other disabled people. With the blood of other trans women. With anyone's blood. And what I know is that voting for one genocidal right-wing party to defeat another genocidal right-wing party is a vote for genocide, a vote that strengthens the far right, a vote for blood.

But as I said at the beginning, what matters isn't the vote – mine, yours, or anyone else's. As W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in 1956, in an essay for *The Nation* called "Why I Won't Vote"<sup>16</sup>:

"Are you voting Democratic? Well and good; all I ask is why?"

The "choose your opponent" approach offers a clear way to assess candidates. It is also based on premises that oppose structural change. And the ethical and political logics at its heart should have no place in our movements.

Whether you vote or not, it shouldn't be why.

And what matters isn't that choice, it's the why behind it.

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16 Which is strikingly relevant from start to finish, especially on the harmonious foreign (military) policy and domestic racial policy of the two parties. I'll restrain myself, and only quote a little more from his concluding paragraphs: "I have no advice for others in this election. [...] I will be no party to it and that will make little difference. You will take large part and bravely march to the polls, and that also will make no difference. [...] Stop yelling about a democracy we do not have." The whole thing is available here: <https://libcom.org/article/why-i-wont-vote-web-du-bois> (Thanks to Derecka Purnell for posting about this gem I'd never encountered)