Patrick Lawrence:

"'Institutionalized powerlessness.'"

Voting as abdication.

25 September 2023

I was reading the other day about Penny Pritzker, offspring of the famously wealthy Chicago family and exuberant but demanding patron of politicians she chooses to favor. Penny Pritzker was in the news because President Biden has just appointed her the overseer of private investment in Ukraine once—theoretically, at this point—reconstruction of the country begins. The Pritzkers have more than occasionally come under heavy fire for crudely, cruelly exploiting service workers at the Hyatt Hotels chain, in which they own what is effectively a controlling share of stock. Penny Pritzker, who is personally worth something more than $3 billion, was previously prominent in the news during Barack Obama's first run for the presidency, in 2008–09. She chaired his campaign's finance operation. And she grew bitter when Obama declined to name her commerce secretary, an office she considered she had purchased fair and square, because by then the labor movement was asking what in hell the new president-elect was doing in bed with someone with so disgraceful a past.

Obama eventually gave Penny Pritzker Commerce, in 2013, by which time he judged the coast to be safely clear. It is preposterous enough that a former community organizer who quoted Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" during his November 2008 victory speech had someone of Penny Pritzker's kind in a senior cabinet position. But this is not why I mention Penny Pritzker. I mention her because of a single sentence from the 15 July 2012 editions of The New York Times. "Without Penny Pritzker," two of its political reporters wrote with refreshing honesty, "it is unlikely that Barack Obama ever would have been elected to the United States Senate or the presidency."

If you need a little time to contemplate the implications of this assertion, do take it: I did.

And then I went on to consider all the reporting over all the years during which money as the sine qua non of our electoral politics has been so normalized as to pass unnoticed among most of us. Campaign finance reform was long a topic among Americans and, indeed, on Capitol Hill. But each time some kind of restriction was passed, we shortly learned that a way around it was already in place. I cannot recall when I last read anything about campaign finance reform.

When we read the coverage of elections now, it is—unapologetically, matter-offactly—about how much money this, that, or the other candidate has raised and how this measures up to his or her opponents.

There are many Penny Pritzkers running around in American politics, to put this point another way. They are sometimes silently behind the scenes, sometimes pleased to stand under the Klieg lights, and at other times indifferent to their visibility or invisibility. This does not matter. The important thing to bear in mind is that it is the Penny Pritzkers among us who control our politics and so run our country. The mainstream press reminds us of this each time it explains to us how such people impose their will by way of a legal but undemocratic process in the name of the democratic process.

There is an election coming next year—per usual advertised as make-or-break, the contest of a lifetime, or what have you. And it is important to bear these raw facts in mind as we consider what we will do on 5 November 2024. Who will I vote for?

Fewer than half of voting-age Americans asked this question in 2020: Pew Research reported last November than the figure was 47.5 percent—and this was a great surge from previous years. This means the majority of Americans eligible to vote three years ago did not ask for whom they should cast a vote. They decided before coming to that question they would not vote. And they didn't. I stand with the 52.5 percent. I do not, and have not for the whole of my adult life, seen the point of voting. I voted once, in 1996, and quickly recognized this as a stain on my record. Having mentioned my view on voting here and there in these commentaries, always in passing, it is time to explain this judgment more fully.

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Back in 2016, when I was publishing at Salon, I wrote a column explaining why (1) one could not vote for Donald Trump in the coming election, (2) one could not vote for Hillary Clinton, and it followed that (3) without resort to a third-party or protest vote, there was no one for whom one could vote.

I sent a draft of the column to a dear friend I will call Peter, because his real name is … Peter. Peter was instantly on the telephone to warn me away from myself.

You cannot say this in print, he asserted. It will destroy your credibility. You will be dismissed. This is too far beyond what people consider the bounds of the acceptable. That was the year of the 52.5 percent. The 52.5 percent did not much go into print with their judgments on our political process. But now, I detect very strongly, it is greatly more acceptable to consider these thoughts in public. The rock-bottom corruption of our political class surely accounts for this. It is a question of mass revulsion.

My reasoning, considered over many years of observing but sitting out elections and as I explained it to Peter, did not and does not seem to me especially complicated—not, at least, in its superficial aspects. To vote is to endorse the process wherein one casts a ballot, and I cannot offer any such endorsement. I do not want my name on a process so fraudulent as America's. I decline to participate in a ritual wherein the Penny Pritzkers are the only ones whose votes count.

Since the ridiculous Citizens United decision of 2010, when the Supreme Court determined that corporations are people, it comes simply to this: Not voting is my vote, a perfectly legitimate vote. After Donald Trump was elected, a lot of people who voted for Hillary Clinton went around with placards reading, "Not my president!" This seemed to me mere self-indulgence. They had participated in the voting process. And by virtue of this participation, Donald Trump was indeed their president. Were these people more mature intellectually and altogether more honest with themselves, they would have accepted that they bore as much responsibility for Trump's election as those who voted for him because they affirmed the legality of the process.

To put these thoughts another way, it is only when more of us vote by not voting, and we reach a critical mass discrediting the process, will we have a chance of finding our way beyond our preposterous circumstances. Do not, in other words, miss the optimism beneath my apparent pessimism.

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Over time I have come to recognize there is a profound psychological dimension to this question of voting or not voting. Voting, given the true nature of the system, is a kind of humiliation—a diminishment or our individuality, a veiled attack, even, on what remains of our reservoirs of self-respect. I come to wonder whether these psychological effects are not part of the design. The one time I voted, in 1996, it was for Bill Clinton, when he was running, in another crucial, make-or-break election, against Bob Dole. Two years later, as I noted recently in this space, Clinton sent a cruise missile into Somalia's only pharmaceutical plant so people would stop thinking about his adolescent libido and the pleasures he took with "that woman," Monica Lewinsky. I felt tricked, betrayed, manipulated, as I say humiliated, and altogether ripped off. I felt invaded, transgressed—an inner state quite beyond the practical matter of voting or not voting. And if one is betrayed or manipulated, there is a betrayer or manipulator somewhere in the story.

A reader recently reminded me of an essay Sartre wrote back in 1973 in *Les Temps Modernes*, the newspaper he co-founded after the war, co-edited, co-wrote, and for a time sold on the streets of Paris, bless him, like a newsboy. I had read ”Elections, piège à cons” long ago. But it happens to me not infrequently that I have read something before I was ready for it, and it is only on re-reading it later on that I am able to grasp the import. So it has been with “Elections, the idiots’ trap,” as I translate the title. Once again, Sartre’s powers of observation and the penetrating acuity of his mind leave me nearly in awe. The distinction Sartre draws to build his argument lies between the legal and the legitimate. They are nothing like the same. The electoral system through which our Penny Pritzkers control our nation’s direction is legal. She and others are not breaking any law when they buy candidates, offices, or whatever else may be on sale at any given moment, or when they effectively limit voters’ choices to the candidates they prefer. But this system as we have it is not legitimate.

Legitimacy, Sartre writes, “comes into being here and there out of the real unity of popular forces.” Removing the idiom common on the French Left fifty years ago, it is when we gather spontaneously and as ourselves to express our shared interests directly and just as they are that we can speak of a legitimate politics.

Sartre published ”Elections, piège à cons” just before legislative contests scheduled for 4 March and 11 March 1973. These polls were considered momentous. France was still unsettled after the events of 1968. There were alliances and splits galore as the French Left challenged the Gaullists. It was in this context that Sartre put the matter this way: “When we go to vote tomorrow, we will once again substitute legal power for legitimate power.”

Sartre begins his investigation of modern elections with 1789, when French landowners were first given the right to vote. Two years later the National Assembly passed the Chapelier Law, named for Guy le Chapelier, who drafted it. This law banned guilds, trade unions, and compagnonnages—fraternal organizations of any kind, roughly speaking. In effect, the propertied classes voted for themselves; those without property, in addition to having no vote, were also forbidden by law to draw together in groups to exercise any kind of direct democracy at, so to say, street level.

We begin to see here how and why Sartre distinguished between the legal and the legitimate. There is a straight line—so I find, anyway—from the Chapelier Law, or its intended purpose, and what happens when a voter participates in a modern election. Sartre’s terms for this are two. Voters are “atomized,” turned into the disconnected beings Giacometti depicted in his famous bronzes. And they are “serialized.” We are serialized as we are made anonymous members of groups that give us no proper identity and no true means of asserting ourselves. We are instead merely units in a series. Serialization is, in effect, a substitute for legitimate organization. The voter acts as a member of various “collectives,” Sartre writes:

«But the collectives address him as a member of a series (the series of newspaper buyers, television watchers, etc.). He becomes, in essence, identical with all the other members, differing from them only by his serial number. We say that he has been serialized…. At that point, serial thinking is born in me…»
Bringing this down to the linoleum tile floors of our lives, here is J.–P. on the act of voting:

«The polling booth standing in the lobby of a school or town hall is the symbol of all the acts of betrayal that the individual may commit against the group he belongs to. To each person it says: "No one can see you, you have only yourself to look to; you are going to be completely isolated when you make your decision, and afterward you can hide that decision or lie about it." Nothing more is needed to transform all the voters who enter that hall into potential traitors to one another. Distrust increases the distance that separates them. If we want to fight against atomization, we must try to understand it first.»

Sartre presents a subtle case—politically subtle, psychologically subtle. But there is nothing subtle about the fate of those who draw the drab curtain aside and support a candidate or a party as they stand behind it. They are made abstract entities, digits. In the universe they have entered, Penny Pritzker is the only one who has a name. They do not vote for their interests but for a party's interests— for, say, Penny Pritzker's interests. Voters are invited to think they act as one with others of common interests, but the political parties, in Sartre's terms, are only simulations of legitimate organizations. In this way, the legitimate power of the individual is destroyed behind those curtains:

«When I vote, I abdicate my power—that is, the possibility everyone has of joining others to form a sovereign group, which would have no need of representatives. By voting I confirm the fact that we, the voters, are always other than ourselves and that none of us can ever desert seriality in favor of the group…. For the serialized citizen, to vote is undoubtedly to give his support to a party. But it is even more to vote for voting … that is, to vote for the political institution that keeps us in a state of powerless serialization.»

There is something exquisite about Sartre's patient examination of one of the central rituals of political life in modern democracies. And I say "modern democracies," plural, because it seems to me the fraud of the electoral process is most advanced in America, but it is by no means limited to America. So far as I can make out, we are considering here a phenomenon endemic to the West.

"By voting, I affirm my institutionalized powerlessness," Sartre writes toward the end of his *Temps Modernes* piece. I wish I did not feel compelled to quote it has I have so as to explain a position to which many—47.5 percent, let's say—are likely to object. I wish we all lived in a polity wherein we gathered in legitimate groups and organizations of our own designs, where our votes mattered, and where those governing us served at our pleasure and under our direction. But we do not. And it is best, always, to recognize one's circumstances so as to proceed constructively beyond them.

When I write of not voting, I do not mean simply abstaining from this or that election. Abstention is a side-door confirmation of one's abiding loyalty to the process. I refer, rather, to refusing to vote as an act in itself. To assert ourselves as true members of our polity will require more action of us than not voting. But in this step alone, this first step, we have refused a legal but illegitimate system. We have de-serialized ourselves.