ANARCHISM IN THE FACE OF FASCISM AND THE ELECTORAL DEBATE[1]

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Resume: With neither Bolsonaro (Liberal Party) nor Lula (Workers' Party) able to secure an outright majority during the October 2nd presidential election in Brazil, both advance to a run off election set to take place on October 30th. There is a great deal of anxiety and tension surrounding the electoral process in the country, which has seen extreme political polarization not dissimilar to what is taking place in the United States. This article was written as a response to a prior piece also published in Jacobin Brasil titled "Anarchists in defense of the vote for Lula." The previous article defended the tactical use of the vote to defeat Bolsonaro as a tool in the antifascist struggle, which is the principal theme the authors take up here. The authors of this article are associated with the Institute for Anarchist Theory and History, a project supported by Black Rose / Rosa Negra.

> We are all obligated to live, more or less, in contradiction with our ideas; but we are socialists and anarchists precisely in the sense that we suffer with this contradiction and seek, so far as it's possible, to shrink it. The day we adapt to this environment, of course, we would no longer have the desire to transform it, and we would become simply bourgeois; penniless bourgeois, perhaps, but no less bourgeois in deeds and intentions. – Errico Malatesta

In my weekly speech in the Civil Construction Union, I will explain the anarchist concept of law, as a bourgeois creation and as a revolutionary creation. There are, in effect, two kinds of laws: those representing the pressure of the possessors on the non-possessors, and those representing the conquests of the non-possessors against their masters. These are laws imposed by revolutions, for example: the Magna Carta, the Declaration of the Rights of Men, the Law of 13th of May, etc. […] But to get such laws, it was never necessary to have representatives in

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parliaments. Imposition takes place on the street, in factories, mines, work centers and barracks.– José Oiticica

This article is a response to the text "Anarchists in defense of the vote for Lula", published in Jacobin Brasil on September 6, 2022. Anarchism has never been a dogma, but there is a deliberate confusion in thinking that, due to its anti-authoritarian stance, there are "as many anarchisms as anarchists", and that anything defended by a self-styled anarchist has validity as part of "anarchism". But this is not correct. Despite its diversity, when we look globally at the history of anarchism in its 150 years of struggle, we can extract a set of principles and elements that constituted it historically. To defend these principles and criticize reformist deviations – since anarchism has always had a revolutionary perspective – is not dogmatic or authoritarian. We cannot let others try to impose strategic perspectives on anarchism that are foreign to our ideology.

Let's start by talking about the Brazilian case of the experience of anarchism in the face of Varguism[5] and trade union corporatism. In 1930, in the midst of the political transformations that were taking place in Brazil with the rise of Getúlio Vargas to power, many unionists, socialists and anarchists – who had fought intensely the coronelista[6] policy known as the "coffee with milk Republic"[7] – came to welcome the new government. This is because, among other things, Varguism represented a fight against that prior political and economic phase, in addition to promoting some workers' rights, which came from, at that point, the struggle of many militants.

When a brutal repression against the most radical elements of the left was installed, together with the rise of union corporatism in an open confrontation with revolutionary trade unionism, most of these militants figured out that their old positions were wrong. However, during those years, even before this repression, other anarchist

[5] [translator] Varguism is the ideology of followers of Brazilian president and dictator Getúlio Vargas who had a critical role in the development of the modern Brazilian state and whose ideology of fascistic populism combined elements of the right and left. The Vargas dictatorship led to historic repression against anarchists and some sections of the left.
[6] [translator] This refers to a system where "colonels", non-military figures generally rural land barons, reigned in corrupt fiefdom's unifying local capitalist and political power in their domains through a web of patronage and domination. It is associated with extreme corruption, violence, and abuse of power and persists to this day literally in some parts of Brasil and in a mutated form in other areas of society.
[7] [translator] The coffee with milk Republic refers to the power sharing agreement in the old Republic prior to the rise of Vargas between the states of São Paulo (dominated by coffee plantation capital) and Minas Gerais (dominated by dairy) with alternating presidencies between representatives of each state and a reliance on regional colonels to maintain their power.

militants inserted[8] in their economic and political bodies had already denounced the illusions of Varguism. In this case, the São Paulo Workers Federation (FOSP) and the Rio Grande do Sul Workers Federation (FORGS), as well as the the newspapers The Plebe, The Syndicalist and The Lantern, were building a strategy to fortify the bases for the imminent attack.

In 1934, these same militants sought to reorganize the Brazilian Workers' Confederation (COB),[9] aiming to form "a single whole of the working class, for the common struggle against the common enemy that is the dominant and tyrannical capitalism", respecting the "organization by local federations, these joined together in state federations and all these unified in the federations of industrial unions". The call for common action was intended to reinforce the collective power of the class, since "associated, workers acquire the strength necessary for their interests". This grassroots articulation could make "Brazil's working class [have] a strong body of defense and struggle capable of placing the organization of our class at the height of the needs of the campaign in favor of our emancipation".

In the same period, anarchists made alliances with socialists of different shades, against the presence of fascism and the Varguista authoritarianism of the time. In dialogue with the National Liberation Alliance (ANL),[10] they warned that "while the allianceists are in the opposition, in the fight against fascism, latifundistas[11] and governmental tyranny […], not deifying people, but fighting for ideas, discussing and fighting around principles, anarchists and allianceists would find themselves side by side".

This context, as well as in others where anarchists were together with the working class debating the course of their own liberation, shows that far from being "dogmatic" or "religious," anarchists were able to adjust their theories and thoughts to the present reality. Without failing to make associations and alliances with other forces, they presented criticisms, proposals and, above all, practices and experiences that provided a framework of tools of struggle for the oppressed. This allowed, at the same time, not to be swallowed up and diluted by other ideologies, since they were not simply "in tow" with the decisions of their adversaries or political opponents. Discussions followed just

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[8] [translator] Insertion is a political term meaning roughly being present, organizing, and agitating within social movements, rather than the sense of merely placed within.
[9] [translator] The Brazilian revolutionary syndicalist union largely built and dominated by anarchist militants.
[10] [translator] An anti-fascist and anti-imperialist organization largely built and dominated by the Communist Party in response to the rise of fascism within Brazil during the early years of Vargas.
[11] [translator] Colonial feudal landlords who dominate rural areas.

as much by its bases (syndicalism) as by its political and ideological family. Those who hadn't done the same exercise suffered political dilution, even moving to other ideological ranks (cases of anarchists who turned into varguistas or corporatist syndicalists were not uncommon) or faced repression without means of defense.

The Pillars of Capitalist Domination

We should understand society and the statist-capitalist system of domination from a wider view. Anarchism and its theoretical currents across history sought to understand that social reality is divided in three spheres: economic, political/juridical/military, and cultural/ideological. The social reality is fruit of a totality formed by these spheres and their interdependent relations. The statist-capitalist system of domination maintains itself through the domination of these three spheres, elections being part of that system. It would be an illusion to think that social transformation, or the "choice of the most favorable scenario", occurs in the ritual of the electoral process, every 2 years.

We do not choose the judges, we don't have control over the repressive apparatus, we don't control the economic system, nor do we have a presence in the innumerable state institutions that are not open to a vote. Furthermore, a country on the periphery of the capitalist system like Brazil is hostage to the action of imperialism and its political and economic tools. Agreements and alliances – including those of progressive candidates – also considerably reduce the margin for navigating within this system. The electoral system is open to a certain extent, but the popular "choice" is always restricted and guarded.

According to the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU):

> Within what was produced by socialist thought, corroborated in large part by social experiences, are theories about the mechanisms of reproduction of the current system. Basic mechanisms that, even in highly differentiated social contexts, operate in a similar way. As a basic set of related, articulated "pieces" that make some things possible and prevent others. Allowing, for example, wealth and poverty to grow; that the different fundamental powers always be in the hands of a privileged minority; that the media conform to 'ideals,' 'values' and 'cultural'

> standards, reaffirming the current system. So, talking about elections is alluding to a 'piece' of a power structure that is much broader.[12]

The History of Anarchism Against Reformism

Anarchism is a revolutionary, socialist, anti-capitalist, anti-statist and anti-authoritarian political ideology. Arising from the critique of different forms of domination, anarchists understand that the radical transformation of society, in an emancipatory and self-managed way, will only be possible with the growth of the social power of the oppressed classes in an internationalist project. This transformation will definitely not take place through the use of the apparatuses of the dominant classes.

The emergence of anarchism in the second half of the 19th century is a historical creation that has as a background not only the union struggle of the 1850s-60s, but also the growing disillusionment of a sector of the working class with the parliamentary disputes and with the republican revolutions, in which many of those who later became anarchists participated. Anarchism matured as a socialism without illusions about the state or its mechanisms of domination – parliament, elections, etc. Therefore, it makes no sense for anarchists to use these mechanisms or reinforce them as a political solution without calling into question their own principles and their critique of the capitalist system. To use a metaphor, wanting to occupy the state to change the system of domination is the equivalent of wanting to become a boss to change capitalism.

Anarchism was constituted as an ideology within the International Workers Association, from the 1860s onwards, developing its political physiognomy strictly linked to the strategy of revolutionary syndicalism; a strategy of struggle that was anti-parliamentary and in favor of a project of social transformation led by the union of workers in their class organs. Anarchism is born and develops, therefore, rejecting parliamentary action. This is as much an integral part of its political practice, not an element open to discussion, as it is an unavoidable historical fact.

Since the internal clashes in the International Workers Association (IWA), one (amongst others) element separates anarchists and Marxists: the use of parliamentary elections as part of the strategy for the emancipation of the working class. Marx and Engels, who represented a sector of the labor movement at the time, had a certain

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[12] Federação Anarquista Uruguaia. Tempos de Eleições. Disponível em <https://anarquismorj.wordpress.com/2012/09/30/fau-tempos-de-eleicoes/>

optimism about the use of the electoral tool, while Bakunin and his group, the Alliance, who represented another sector of the labor movement at the time, did not.

Our project, socialist and libertarian, intends to replace the current system of domination with a political system of self-government: self-management. To this aim, throughout history anarchist militants analyzed reality and, based on this analysis, developed strategies of struggle (different for each internal current of anarchism) to make popular movements move towards this proposal. Far from being a stagnant idea in the air, on four occasions anarchism proved to be a powerful material tool for the social transformation of reality: in the Mexican Revolution (1911), in the Ukrainian Revolution (1921), in the Manchurian Revolution (1929) and in the best known, the Spanish Revolution (1936). In all four of these revolutions (and even in others in which anarchist influence was marginal), the electoral process was peripheral to the triggering of revolutionary processes. The core has always been the accumulation, construction and strengthening of mass popular movements, which had as its objective a revolutionary and anti-capitalist rupture.

Some would say: “but we’re not talking about revolution, we’re talking about guaranteeing minimum reforms and blocking counter-reforms”. Well ok. Whenever the revolutionary perspective disappears from the horizons of social fighters, pragmatism takes the place of utopia. Conference agreements replace grassroots decisions and anti-capitalism is replaced by the reformist policy of “less bad”. But even in this aspect of reformism, the vote seems secondary to us. We will quote here just two episodes so as not to abuse the patience of our readers.

The first one concerns the victory of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, in 1951. When trying to carry out an agrarian reform in the country, a measure that is not even properly anti-capitalist, Arbenz was overthrown by a coup d’état organized by the USA. In fact, a young medical student who lived in Guatemala at that time began to develop his thesis of revolutionary rupture based on the disillusionment with the electoral strategy: Ernesto Rafael Guevara.

The other, which took place in Chile in 1970, was the election of Salvador Allende, perhaps the most significant historical example of the use of electoral strategy to promote reforms and stop the reactionary advance, resulting in yet another coup that overthrew the government.

Reformism, therefore, does not solve the political, economic and social problem.

On the other hand, we have diverse examples that through the strategy of revolutionary syndicalism (of anarchist origin) and combative struggle in different countries where revolutionary processes were not conceived: various labor rights were conquered, forcing the State to adhere to the demands sought through direct action and self-organization of the working class, won with the organization of strikes and other revolutionary tactics and demands.

The Real Polemics

The significant internal controversies (that is, recurrent in history and which divided anarchism) never took place between voting and not voting, but on the following themes: organization, the role of short-term struggles, and the use of violence.

With organization, anarchism has historically been divided between organizationalists and anti-organizationalists, the former being in favor of anarchist action in mass bodies: unions, popular movements, etc. Within the organizationalist camp some anarchists defend, in addition to in mass bodies, the foundation of specific anarchist organizations. Anti-organizationalists, on the other hand, are against formal organizations at the ideological (anarchist) and social (popular movements) level, despite the fact that many of them maintained relationships with various unions throughout history. It should be noted that anti-organizationists were always in the minority.

We speak here as anarchists of the organizationalist camp, as we are in favor of the accumulation of social power in mass bodies as the main lever of the revolutionary transformation of reality. This does not end with the short electoral calendar. Therefore, we are and will be, without sectarianism, alongside other comrades who – regardless of their political position in front of the polls – build these popular movements on a daily basis, beyond the elections. This will be the greatest contribution to the defeat of Bolsonarism: a strong unity of popular struggle for rights and against reactionary sectors.

On the role of short-term struggles, anarchism was divided between possibilists and impossibilists. The former maintain that anarchist society will not emerge overnight and, therefore, short-term struggles (for better wages, housing, work, land and various other demands that meet the needs of the oppressed classes) play an important role in the construction of a perspective of revolutionary transformation of society, especially when won by direct action (of masses) and social struggle. This idea became known in anarchist circles as “revolutionary gymnastics”. On the other hand, the impossibilists, on the other

hand, believe that small reforms divert the working class from the revolutionary path, helping the capitalist system to adjust by not jeopardizing its foundations.

We stand on the side of the possibilists, understanding that the struggle for better living conditions is fundamental in the revolutionary journey and that there are only reforms and significant advances in social rights when we fight for them.

Finally, on the use of violence, the division among anarchists was not between a pacifist sector and another favorable to the use of revolutionary violence. This is because pacifists were completely negligible in the history of anarchism, although they were generally overvalued by a literature that does not look at anarchism in a global manner. On this topic, the division is made specifically between those who understand that revolutionary violence must be operated and function in agreement with previously established popular movements (the so-called mass strategy), and the insurrectionist strategy, which claims that violence can function as a a trigger, a form of propaganda that could stimulate the rebellion of the oppressed classes.

On this matter, we are on the side of the mass strategy and we believe that any process of rupture, or even a serious confrontation with fascism, is impossible without debating this issue. The ossified republicanism of our institutional left has simply blocked discussion on this issue and this, after all, is yet another symptom of the degeneration brought about by the electoral focus. In times when fascists arm themselves and threaten public figures on the left, our self-defense should already be actively debated.

We raise this historical and global panorama of anarchism, in its 150 years, to affirm that the controversy about anarchists voting or not in bourgeois elections is completely artificial and has no echo in the history of anarchism. If it is true that in Spain the National Confederation of Labor (CNT) released its militancy to vote on at least two occasions (which is different from having carried out an electoral campaign), at the time the organization had around 2 million members, more than 20 years of uninterrupted struggle, a program of transition to a socialist and self-managed economy, and its main intention was to free its political prisoners. The CNT and the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) had to organize the fight against fascism at all levels, the opposite of what we see in Brazilian social democracy today.

Other (much more important) controversies were recurrent and consumed more energy from anarchist militancy than the issue of voting. The field of anarchism that we adhere to, in short, has the strategy of transforming reality: the accumulation of social power in popular movements, with struggles for reforms serving as “revolutionary

gymnastics" and the development of advanced forms of struggle, placing the theme of revolutionary violence under discussion, having as a horizon the construction of a revolutionary rupture. Any debate of confronting fascism should also go through this strategy, not the individual decision between voting or not.

The slow incorporation of the working class as "citizens" in the arena of the incipient European bourgeois democracy of the 19th century was not seen by the libertarian sector of socialism as a victory, but as a way of stifling the radical struggles that took over Europe. In this sense, anarchism proved to be correct, as the universalization of suffrage domesticated the revolutionary sectors and produced a strong consensus that every two years profound changes could be carried out, when in reality the social structures of exploitation and domination remain intact.

To strengthen our argument, we will cite two structural elements that shape the Brazilian reality. The first is structural racism, the fruit of the genocide created by Portuguese colonialism in our territory and the slave trade. The second is the high land concentration in our country. In which government in Brazilian history (even those of the center-left) were there important structural changes to promote the end of latifundios and the genocide of the black population and the poor? We cite these two aspects of reality because we consider them to be central to all revolutionaries, central aspects that fed proto-fascist and fascist elements. How will this election combat them?

Understanding Fascism to Crush It

There are different interpretations of the characterization of Bolsonarism. There are those who consider it a far-right movement, but not a fascist one. Others characterize it as proto-fascist, and there is still another sector that sees Bolsonarism as a neo-fascist movement. Regardless of the characterization, it is correct to say that Bolsonarism is an extreme right-wing, misogynist, patriarchal, militarist, racist and reactionary movement, supported mainly by the latifundista ruling classes, by part of the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie.

Bolsonarism also took root in sectors of the working class and spread through gun clubs, neo-Pentecostal churches, low and high officers of the security and armed forces (paramilitary or military), conservative entities and reactionary media. Bolsonarism's arc of alliances includes neo-Pentecostal leaders, servile sections of the high command of military, agrobusiness that supports the politics of environmental crime, the proto-fascist

business community and all those who support an institutional coup from this diffuse tropical trumpism.

The lesson of Bolsonarism and its challenge to society in all spheres (cultural/ideological, political-military and economic) attests that fascism only advanced because fascists decided to contest society, with the electoral occupation of the State (the political body of the ruling class) as a consequence of this. The genesis of German and Italian fascism demonstrate the same. Their electoral power came from conservative and reactionary political work within the masses which transformed the movement into a regime.

Fascism also arises in historical contexts where there is erosion and crisis of progressive governments. Examples of this were the rise of National Socialism after the crisis of the Weimar Republic and Bolsonarism, conceived after thirteen years of PT[13] governments. The popular demonstrations of 2013 (wrongly characterized as part of a hybrid war)[14] put into relief the social demands unmet by PT governments (issues around public transport, health, education, among others) and put the PT management model in crisis. This model, it should be said, ruled with the support not only of progressive movements, but also of sectors of neo-Pentecostalism, bankers, the national bourgeoisie and latifundiarios linked to agrobusiness.

Arising from the inability to deepen the reforms demanded by the bourgeoisie, it was decided to abandon the PT model of class conciliation and support governments opposed to reforms (such as the Temer[15] and Bolsonaro governments), which put the oppressed classes in a defensive situation from 2013 onwards.

A Mass Line Strategy

As anarchists, our strategy involves strengthening base organizations and linking popular struggle in all spheres of society with the aim of encouraging the oppressed classes to leave their current defensive condition, advancing in their struggles, even if at

[13] [translator] Partido dos Trabalhadores, the Workers Party. Born near the end of the dictatorship through an alliance of various left groupings centered around union struggles which became the ruling center-left political force 2003–2016.
[14] [translator] A common narrative from sections of the Brazilian left was that the 2013 popular uprising around transit costs, and living conditions broadly, was part of a covert war by imperialist powers (the US mainly) to dislodge the left from power.
[15] [translator] Temer, a center right politician, became unelected president when Dilma Rouseff (PT) was impeached (which many on the left argue was a constitutional coup) and initiated austerity measures.

first on a small scale, so that we do not direct a new round of class conciliation and a wave of the moderate-right, seeking to strengthen our positions in the class struggle.

For this, it is not enough to hold your nose and ally with the liberal-right. These alliances already show the limits that will be tolerated by the next government. Anti-fascism and the advancement of our rights can only be operated from the action of mass movements that confront the main bases of fascists (rural and urban), and should not remain trapped in a countercultural or niche stronghold. To be effective, the political action of anarchist militancy must arise from social fronts of struggle, organizing from the bottom up, engaging in distributive conflict and not reinforcing the apparent legality of republican institutions with the electoral ritual.

It is necessary to take root, create and strengthen popular movements and unions that increasingly should have a revolutionary perspective as their horizon. We are certainly not alone in this endeavor, and of course we know that it is in the medium and long term. The old grassroots work is the sea where anarchist militancy must be. This daily work is not limited to an election Sunday. The necessary front of the oppressed classes is urgent to win the streets and advance in the struggle for rights. We understand that this is how fascism will be defeated.

We also understand, however, that, at the same time, we need to have a serious debate on the social-democratic and PT hegemony within the unions and organized popular movements. It is this hegemony that paralyzes any more combative action and reduces the political horizon to the minimum possible.

The trap is set: if we do not have the accumulation of social strength on the present horizon, the prospects of “easy” and immediate solutions grow, which, in the end, empty the revolutionary perspective. This is where a dangerous pragmatism enters for those who claim to be revolutionaries: “if we can’t do anything now, let us surrender to electoral reformism and give up contesting society”.

It was this same reformist perspective, hegemonic on the left since the 1980s, that acted strongly to demobilize, bureaucratize and tame the mass movements. An example of this was the extremely low capacity for mobilization in response to the 2016 juridical-parliamentary coup and to Bolsonarism from 2018 onwards, the result of the abandonment of prioritizing grassroots work and collective construction alongside the working class. With little capacity for mobilization, sections of the left began to defend the legalism of bourgeois institutions, almost as a consolation prize, up to the point that

conservative institutions such as Rede Globo[16] and the Supreme Court began to be seen as "tactical allies".

In the meantime, Bolsonarism went on the offensive, spreading throughout the entire Brazilian social fabric and questioning the system from the perspective of a "revolt from within", while the hegemonic left limited itself to defending the institutions and legality of bourgeois democracy, putting all their chips down in the electoral contest.

What yields a basis for a long-term strategy is to broaden the accumulation of social power in the short term, in what is called general strategy in the strict sense, or in a limited timeframe. None of this involves adherence, critical or otherwise, to electoral campaigns. But it must be the heart of the anti-fascist struggle. In this anti-fascist struggle it is necessary to debate concepts as well as fighting to take the streets from the extreme right. Even more important, however, is to be present in the most exploited and oppressed social layers, not allowing the working class and sectors of the Brazilian people to be at the mercy of grifter pastors, paramilitary forces formed by police militias, and other degenerations of bourgeois society. This is what we should be talking about, not an individual and depoliticized adherence to the vote.

The day after the elections will not disorganize the reactionary political forces present in the country. They can only be dealt with correctly if we do not dilute our program into alliances with the liberal right and the center right – with Alckmin[17] and company. Our perspective needs to aim toward a program of struggle in popular movements and unions, putting the most important issues for the Brazilian working class on the agenda.

If we want to build a broad socialist and revolutionary perspective, this necessarily involves abandoning reformist and electoral illusions. Every time the left joined parliamentary reformism, it degenerated into innocuous politics, making professional parliamentarians and politicians more powerful than the collective bases of popular organizations and movements.

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[16] [translator] A virtual media monopoly traditionally tied to the dictatorship and the right, however like Trump with other organs of the established media, came to be attacked by Bolsonaristas for any semblance of criticism or questioning.

[17] [translator] Geraldo Alckmin is Lula's present Vice Presidential candidate in the 2022 election. Previously he was a frequent opponent of the left, being known for having attacked the workers movement, landless workers movement, and conditions of the working class in São Paulo. Lula's decision to make an alliance with Alckmin stirred discomfort in the left, but little resistance during the election cycle.

It makes no sense to pressure or harass anarchists to vote. Our debate should go deeper and analyze the implications of this intricate system of domination. For this, it is important that we anarchists maintain our internal coherence, so that we do not raffle off our project. In fact, if anarchism today had a relevant force to the point of decisively influencing this election, the dominant classes would be less concerned with our "possibility" of voting, and more concerned with the real threat to this system of domination.

We anarchists will continue to vote: within popular movements (making decisions), in union assemblies, community/student associations and our anarchist political organizations to build another power: popular power. We will continue aligned in the fight against fascism, without sectarianism, with militants who have different perspectives from ours and who decided to vote in this election. As long as they are with us at the bases and building that horizon, we will be allies.

Date: October 5th, 2022

Source: Retrieved on May 24th, 2023 from blackrosefed.org/anarchism-in-the-face-of-fascism-and-the-electoral-debate.

Notes: Translated by S Nicholas Nappalos, This article was originally published by Jacobin Brasil.

Published on May 2, 2024, in the Institute of Anarchist Theory and History (ITHA).