Up in the air: The legacy of the New Communist Movement

An interview with Max Elbaum

Spencer A. Leonard

On October 17, 2010, Spencer A. Leonard interviewed Max Elbaum, author of Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che, *to discuss the New Communist Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. The interview was aired during two episodes of* Radical Minds *on* WHPK–FM *Chicago, on October 26 and November 9. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.*

Spencer Leonard: To start off in the broadest possible way, how and when did the New Communist Movement emerge? What sort of politics did it espouse?

Max Elbaum: During the late 1960s there was a broad radicalization across many sectors of society, responding mainly to racism and the Vietnam War. It was a time when the Third World was alive with national liberation movements, most of which identified with some form of Marxism or Marxism-Leninism: the Cuban Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, Vietnam, Southern Africa, and a number of political movements in the Middle East. Revolution seemed like a possibility to many. People were looking around for some framework. While Trotskyism and the established Communist Party [CP] had their adherents, the majority of those who turned to revolutionary politics looked toward Third World national liberation movements. They embraced various versions of Marxism-Leninism influenced by what they thought—what we thought—were the lessons of those Third World revolutions. Many decided that building some kind of new Leninist party would harness the emerging revolutionary sentiment.

So from 1968 through the early 1970s, large numbers of young people, some of whom had been involved in various liberation movements, all gathered into a common but loose political trend that called itself the New Communist Movement or the Anti-Revisionist Movement. This included former members of the Black Panther Party, SNCC, white students from SDS, the Puerto Rican movement, the Chicano movement, the Asian-American movement. By styling themselves "anti-revisionist" they intended to say that the official CP had surrendered its revolutionary perspectives for a non-revolutionary revision of Marxism-Leninism.

SL: Today it seems almost unimaginable that in the 1970s Marxists constituted a dynamic section of a vibrant anti-capitalist Left. The entire Left now barely registers in U.S. politics. Advocates of revolutionary politics have only the barest foothold in popular movements and, among them, anarchists and revolutionary nationalists exercise greater influence than Marxists. Given the radical difference between the 1970s and the 2000s, why reexamine the history of the New Communist Movement? When you published the book in 2002, what intervention in the contemporary left did you hope to effect?

ME: After the group I had been in during the 1970s and 1980s disbanded, I was working in California on an ecumenical socialist magazine called *CrossRoads*. I was also working to organize opposition to a range of anti-working class, anti-immigrant propositions on the California ballot. In both projects, we began to encounter young people who had been radicalized during the first Gulf War. It was striking how little these people who had come up from 1989–1995 knew about what had happened after the 1960s. Many had heard of the Black Panther Party, and there was literature about the CP, and so on. But there was nothing about the New Communist Movement. I thought that some book should cover that history since, after all, it was an important part of the political experience of that generation. I also felt more generally that the Left in the 1990s had failed to appreciate the strengths and the weaknesses of the New Communist Movement. So I wanted to get all of this on the record.

SL: What are some of the lessons you felt were being neglected?

ME: For one thing, there was a fetish of ideological purity in the different trends of the New Communist Movement, a certain kind of voluntarism that attempted to leap over objective conditions. These problems affected our generation and glimpses of them came through again around Seattle in the World Trade Organization protests in 1999. We were also afflicted by rigid ideas about organization. Both led to various kinds of sectarian squabbling. There was also a general underestimation of how much serious theoretical and strategic assessment needed to be done regarding the society in which we live. A kind of American anti-intellectualism affected the New Communist Movement even as it promoted slogans like Lenin's "Without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement."

On the positive side, the New Communist Movement was dedicated to internationalism and to building a multi-racial movement committed to fighting racist discrimination. That was unusual for the time and produced some very strong bonds across social barriers. It also managed to produce some political victories, albeit often on only a small scale. The effort to sink roots in the working class, the effort to try to build long-term organizations, ones that have some staying power—indeed, the idea that you would go through some ebbs and flows—these were some of the strengths of the ideas that infused the Communist Movement. I do not agree today with some of our theoretical explications, but there was a lot that was positive there.

For one thing, the organizational model back then stands in contrast to what people today call the nonprofit industrial complex: large numbers of people organizing in and through NGOs. Nonprofits have their place, but there is nothing for the Left like an individual membership forming a voluntary organization focused on common goals.

SL: The founding moment of the New Communist Movement came in the late 1960s, when activists involved in anti-racist politics and the protest movement against the Vietnam War came to discover Marxism. Many of these activists, as you write, felt that if their moment was itself not revolutionary, it was at least pre-revolutionary, a 1905 moment prior to a coming 1917. There was the idea that the 1960s were a dress rehearsal for a revolution expected to take place in the activists' lifetimes. Can you elaborate the grounds on which leftists in the 1960s and early 1970s based their assessment of their historical moment? What consequences did this assessment have for how they oriented and conducted their politics?

ME: The picture of the world that people held at the end of the 1960s was that the U.S. was the most powerful country in the capitalist world, that a whole section of the world had broken off from the capitalist system—the Soviet bloc, China, and so on—and that these were "socialist" or "counter-system" states or what have you. Of course, there were many debates around this question. In addition, Third World countries engaged in late-stage decolonization struggles voiced socialist aspirations. According to this picture big chunks of the world were already non-capitalist and whole other chunks were moving away from capitalism. Given this we searched for movements within the capitalist world which, while beginning largely with young people and students, nevertheless seemed poised to forge links with the American working class, as we understood to be happening in France and Italy. In addition to this, many thought the profits within the imperialist metropole were going to be squeezed, requiring more concessions from the working class, which might prompt further radicalization.

Moreover, there was a certain intangible ideological quality to the moment. People who were 22, 23 in the late 1960s were old enough to remember those southern governors standing at the universities saying, "Segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!" A few years later, Jim Crow was outlawed. In terms of the change in the laws, and in light of the huge Freedom Movement, people felt they could identify with the people involved in the Freedom Rides and sit-ins. You knew those people if you were not one of them yourself. In addition to all the cultural ferment, a certain intellectual viewpoint emerged as to what the map of the world was, and with it a sense of having lived through a period of incredible change in which ordinary people had come on the stage and made a huge difference. Together these factors made revolution seem extremely plausible. That said, I don't think many of us thought, "The revolution is coming tomorrow." Certainly, those of us who had some political experience knew it was not going be a straight shot, one linear ascent all the way to revolution. But you are right to say that we understood ourselves as inhabiting a 1905 moment. The 1960s were our dress rehearsal: Contradictions were going to intensify, and in a decade or so there would come another movement that could be bigger, broader, and farther to the Left. That was the mindset.

SL: Would you say that the New Communist Movement really came too late, or that mistakes were made that might have been able to generate, as you say, more of an in-it-for-the-long-haul revolutionary current, one more resilient than what actually survived till today?

ME: Well, yes. The spirit of the book is that the revolutionary project is legitimate, positive, and desirable. Revolutionary politics are reaffirmed, if you will. But the book is also a self-critique about mistakes made along the way. Still, I do not think that we could have accomplished a revolution even if the generation of 1968 had made no mistakes. That said, were it not for our mistakes the 1970s

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Statement of Purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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would have been different, the 1980s would have been different. There's a long debate about which mistakes were avoidable and which were not. It is impossible to do anything without making some mistakes. So how many of those mistakes could have been avoided, exactly which ones, what occurred at the level of individual shortcomings—such reflections can spin off into purely philosophical questions, or become an indulgence in alternate history. But certainly we took some wrong turns, and distinguishing these from the impulses and directions that moved things forward is what the book attempts to do, first of all by laying out all the facts of a history that most people are unaware of.

For example, given the goal of revolution, one still has to decide whether one is entering an offensive period or a defensive period. Are you going into a period that's likely to produce advances and gains, or are you going into a period that will require consolidating gains already made while staving off a counterattack? You never know for sure, but you abandon materialism if you fail to make an estimate of the forces that are on your side and those arrayed against you. You have to ask, What are the tendencies? What is likely and whom do you work with? That is integral to Marxism, figuring out what is on the agenda within the constraints of objective circumstances. Marxists seek to understand their circumstances without apologizing for or accommodating to them, so they can know what they should do. We wrongly assessed our circumstances and the balance of forces. We overestimated the strength of the forces opposed to capitalism worldwide and underestimated U.S. capitalism's counterattack.

We also took a whole bunch of things for granted. We thought that the gains of the welfare state, for example, were here to stay. We thought there was no significant tendency that could become dominant the way neoliberalism has become dominant. Had we assessed that better, we might have adjusted our strategies, our tactics and organizational approaches, to preempt and weaken the counteroffensive while keeping our side strong. I do not think that the revolution was going to happen in the 1970s or the 1980s, but had the generation of 1968—not just the New Communist Movement, but all of us who had turned to leftist, radical, and revolutionary thinking—done it better, we certainly could have entered the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond in a much stronger position than we did.

SL: Respecting the relative merits of the Chinese, the Cuban, and the Vietnamese parties, what pitfalls arose from attempting to constitute proletarian politics on the basis of examples from largely agrarian societies such as these?

ME: I do not think anyone in the New Communist Movement thought that we could duplicate the revolutionary processes or approaches of Cuba, China, or Vietnam. I mean, everyone understood that those were Third World societies with huge proportions of peasantry while the U.S. was a majority working class society, an advanced industrial society. So on that level I do not think people within the New Communist Movement sought simply to import those models. Still, this was a period when violence was in the air, confrontation was very intense, the level of conflict in the street had risen, and people had witnessed, to take one example, the repression leveled against the Black Panthers. Of course, there were some patterns taken from those revolutionary experiences that were unfortunately imported into politics here. Additionally, the complexity and importance of dealing with the electoral arena was not fully appreciated.

SL: Within the New Communist Movement, what sense had developed of the potentials concentrated in an advanced capitalist country such as the United States, potentials that could not be grasped by looking to politics developed under more adverse conditions?

ME: It was not until later that some of Gramsci's ideas became popular, so we did not sufficiently grasp the complexities of dealing with radical politics in an advanced bourgeois democracy such as the United States. This was partially because we looked mostly to groups in the Third World for inspiration. There was interchange and study back and forth with people in Italy and Portugal and Western Europe and Japan, but probably not as much as there should have been.

There was a general ideological notion that the received theory of Marxism-Leninism was sufficient theoretically. While certainly it had to be applied to concrete conditions in the United States, the big theoretical questions were thought to have been solved. I no longer agree with that. Nor am I certain that everyone completely agreed with it at the time, though it was at any rate the dominant stance, and people more or less proceeded accordingly. Even the anti-revisionism phrase indicates a return to orthodoxy as opposed to breaking new ground.

There was, of course, a positive side. After all, this was a period—it is a little different today although not completely—in which few recognized that white people in the United States might have something to learn from societies and people of color in the Third World. That advancement was important for human equality and democracy. It does not mean you follow and adopt ideas uncritically, but it certainly means that you might learn something as well as teach.

SL: To what extent was the necessity of expressing solidarity with the Left *through* critique of the Third World movements felt among this generation of intellectuals?

ME: There was no shortage of criticism of parties around the world. There was no notion that people in the Third World can do no wrong and we just have to follow them. Different people within the New Communist Movement tended, as much out of sectarianism as anything else, to embrace one or another ideological schema and then do battle with the other ones. That was a common problem and it has been a problem for the Marxist Left, and for the Left generally, for a long time. But this raises the question of how one can develop critical solidarity given the complexities of U.S. domination of the Third World, and given how little people know about what is going on there. It's a real challenge and the Communist Movement did not meet it particularly well, but I am not sure that it was much worse on this account than other Left tendencies. Indeed, in some respects it was better. Of course, that is not a good enough standard if we talking about how to reconstitute the Left today.

SL: To what extent was there a project of developing intellectual and theoretical leadership in the United States, where so much potential is concentrated in terms of education and theoretical development? How much did young people in the New Communist Movement see that as a responsibility? Also, to what degree was there tension between orienting towards the Third World, on the one hand, and trying to develop workers' political consciousness here in the United States, on the other?

ME: It's hard to generalize about the New Communist Movement in that regard because there was a strong anti-intellectualist strain that was more dominant in some groups than in others. But there were also *Capital* reading groups and other attempts at an exploration of theory. It was a mixed bag.

SL: A lot of the questions point towards the question of orthodoxy. But it is not exactly clear how we inherit this orthodoxy, or how orthodoxy can be said to establish itself and its credentials. When we look back historically, prestige surrounds revolutionary success, and in a sense, guarantees orthodoxy. But this begs the question of how the whole history of revolutionary communism is assessed, of what constitutes "success." There is, for instance, the question of Stalinism and the political transformations within the Eastern Bloc. But allow me again to press on the tension between the orientation towards the Third World movement and the project of "sinking roots in the working class."

ME: The word "tension" is apt. The basic standpoint of the New Communist Movement was that the capitalist exploiters who ran the U.S. were the common enemy of the Third World and American workers. To defeat that common enemy meant liberation for both. We were bound together by international proletarian solidarity and we shared a common enemy. On the other hand, there were tendencies impassioned by the brutality of the wars in the Third World, tendencies that shared resentment toward those Americans who seemed not to share their visceral anger. This tension could lead to Weathermen-style politics that simply denounced the vast majority of the population as collaborators with the enemy and arguing for the need to "fight the people."

More generally, the New Communist Movement did not pay much attention to the visionary component about what progress and socialism could look like in the U.S. in an era of abundance. This may have stemmed in part from anti-consumerist ideas inherited from the New Left. But while there were shortcomings in how the New Communist Movement dealt with internationalism, there was, as I say, a widespread understanding that Vietnamese workers, Uruguayan workers, Palestinian workers, American workers, all had a common enemy. The problem was turning this into effective practice, and I certainly think that the New Communist Movement did not master that.

SL: Throughout the New Communist Movement, you saw young people politicized in the 1960s turning away from middle class professions and proletarianizing themselves for the sake of left politics. You write that the New Communist Movement

> worked overtime to present itself—and actually become—culturally in and of the proletariat. This was no simple task. Faced with a badly divided working class and fuzzy borders between the working class and other classes, it was hard to locate any kind of uniform or clear-cut working class culture. Within people of color communities there were identifiable cultures of resistance, and a few organizations had some success in meshing into and helping sustain them. But there were few left-wing cultural milieus that simultaneously crossed racial lines and had a mass character. (170)

Wanting to fuse itself with the proletariat, leaders within the New Communist favored "working class" styles of dress, discouraged or banned drug use and homosexuality, adopted what you call a "crude anti-intellectualism masquerading as hostility towards elitism," and even encouraged alcohol use. This points to how the New Communist Movement came to understand the working class as something uniform or clear-cut that had identifiable tastes and practices, rather than as something to be intersected and even criticized. How did this conception of class and class politics develop, and in what ways might it have limited the activity or imagination of the New Communist Movement?

ME: That kind of reification of workers did not work. It came from a lot of inexperience, prejudices, stereotypes, and a certain kind of orthodoxy, in the sense of a certain image of what had happened in the 1930s, which many tried simply to reproduce despite vastly altered conditions. In many cases the image itself was largely constructed, and does not correspond to what actually happened in the 1930s. As time went on, those New Communist Movement groups that managed to get past an initial stage and acquire enough staying power that they had some relationship to at least some group of workers—a group of a few hundred or perhaps a few thousand at most—usually shed the sort of practices and prejudices you mention.

The Communist Party in the 1930s grew to some tens of thousands of members, about half industrial workers. None of the New Communist Movement groups approached such a size or depth of influence in the working class. So, of course, their conceptions, interactions, were more primitive; idiosyncratic factors of different individuals can exert much more influence in a small group, and even become dominant, in a way that does not usually happen when you actually become a mass sociological phenomenon, which the New Communist groups at their best were only ever on the edge of. We never quite made it over that hump. Some tendencies still exist, but none of them developed the kind of organic roots in the working class the way the communists did in the 1930s.

SL: The commitment to anti-racism was a defining element among all New Communist tendencies, but the specifics of anti-racist politics became intensely divisive. During the Boston busing crisis, for example, the

Black Panthers dare to struggle at a rally in Oakland, 1969.

movement was divided over whether forced integration of Boston schools was actually part of a ruling class plot to divide the working class. Judged in retrospect, from the perspective of today's functionally post-racist society—whose social barbarism towards racial minorities nonetheless matches or even exceeds the past, in the sense that in Obama's America we are, in a way, facing both a more and less racist society—the anti-racist politics of the New Communist Movement feel misguided or anachronistic, if not destructive. In particular, what are the limits, as you see them today, of viewing the racial composition of the American working class in terms of oppressed national minorities, given all the difficulties this led to in the 1970s and before?

ME: Most of the New Communist Movement embraced the resolutions of the 1928 and 1930 CP grappling with the oppression of African-Americans in the U.S. The CP was trying to deal with the reawakening of politics that addressed race head on—peoples of color across the world, national liberation movements, the Marcus Garvey movement, and so on. So there was an effort on the CP's part to deal with the fact that there was a distinct dynamic to the black freedom movement; it had a cross-class dynamic against racial discrimination, it was progressive, it was for equality and democracy. The particular theoretical frame that emerged in the writing on this is that African-Americans constituted or formed a nation, so their struggle was a national liberation movement from within. African-Americans in the Black Belt in the South constituted a nation and African-Americans elsewhere in the country constituted a national minority.

There was a lot of debate in the CP, and there has been a lot of historical debate about how much the actual "nation" aspect in this formulation of the "Black Belt" thesis had to do with an advancement of practice in the CP through the 1930s or 1940s, and how much had to do with the fact that the working class had to embrace the demands for equality being put forth by blacks. By the 1970s, most groups had a version of the black nation thesis, though some did not. But certainly all the groups in the New Communist Movement felt that the struggle against racism had its own independent dynamic. It was not simply reducible to the issue of class, but was an important struggle to be taken up by the working class as a whole.

So that was the background to the Boston busing crisis. The controversy within the New Communist movement revolved around the final ruling, whether it had to be supported as a product of the desegregation struggle that had been waged by Boston's black community and its allies for more than a decade, or whether it represented a plot by the ruling class to divide workers. A few groups argued that the judge's decision was a ruling class ploy, but most recognized that the working class was already divided by racism. On the ground, the resistance to the busing ruling was principally a "keep blacks out" movement. That resistance took violent form. There were mobs attacking buses with school children, and so forth. Most of the Left, and most of the New Communist Movement, took the point of view that blacks had the right to go to any school they wanted, and that this was an anti-segregation struggle: "It's not the bus it's us," as Jesse Jackson, who was involved in that movement, put it. Most of the NAACP and most of the black freedom movement, most of the New Communist Movement, the Trotskyist groups, all took the line that it was an anti-racist struggle.

The Revolutionary Union, which was the largest New Communist Movement group at the time, and a few others, took the line that it was a ruling class ploy to divide the workers. So the New Communist Movement was not united in its opposition. It was pretty much the first time since the New Communist Movement's emergence in the 1960s that it was not united, in a practical sense, around a particular struggle. There had been all these theoretical debates around national oppression, the Black Belt thesis, national struggles, but it had not yet been translated into taking different sides in a practical struggle of large significance. By the mid-1970s the Boston busing crisis had taken on national importance. There were national demonstrations. Boston had become a flashpoint of the anti-racist struggle and the New Communist tendency provided no unified direction.

What that had to do with the actual existence of a "black nation" or not, I don't know. It is still difficult for me to figure out how exactly that fits in to the political struggle around Boston's busing. I think the debate had more to do with one's understanding of mass struggles and reforms and how the ruling class makes concessions, whether its concessions are plots that divide and weaken or whether they have a dual character. On the one hand, concessions such as the busing decision had been wrung out of the ruling class through mass struggle. On the other hand, the ruling class, when it makes concessions, always tries to make them on its own terms and in a way that is also likely to benefit them. At any rate, the Boston busing crisis was a turning point in the New Communist Movement's capacity to unite and in its stature as a pole of attraction for the Left as a whole. Combined with struggles over Chinese policies, this proved divisive. The New Communist Movement lost the strength of attraction it had exercised from 1969 up until that point.

SL: The relationship between the Black Belt thesis and whether to interpret the busing decision as a ruling class plot remains opaque. While I agree that problems of racism and the politics of anti-racism remain, the way these were argued—in terms of the presence of third world nationalities in the USA, or even the idea that American minorities naturally "belong" to or have some other nationality than American—seem very foreign to the present moment. That a black person could be a corporate manager or indeed the commander in chief of American imperialism is something that most people take for granted today.

ME: The New Communist Movement group I was in did not think that the Black Belt thesis was theoretically sound even in the 1930s, much less the 1970s. We argued a very different point of view. There is a whole school of thought around this that has evolved into critical race theory and various other strands that look at the history of racial categories, race relations, racism, and race in America. I agree that strictly using the only tools of nation and nationality is not particularly useful in analyzing the history of race in America.

At the time, we had some sharp polemics in the New Communist Movement over this, and the debate lingers today. The folks whom I disagreed with then, even if I did not think the theoretical tools were the right ones, were nevertheless largely sensible. When looking at the theory debates, it is clear that much of it often came down to whose ideas, in the abstract, better imitated the prevailing orthodoxy or seemed to show greater loyalty to it. There were a lot of gymnastics around that, but when it came down to analyzing concrete struggles, the majority of the folks were pretty good. Even if they used theoretical frameworks I disagreed with, many of them engaged in quite advanced practice around the struggles of the 1970s.

For approaching today's society, though, I do not think the idea that there are oppressed nations within the borders of the US is helpful in terms of understanding the political economy and social relationships, unless perhaps you are referring to specific Native American tribes who have treaty relations with the U.S. government, but that is a far different situation.

SL: You argued that the New Communist Movement was mistaken in its assessment of how ripe capitalism was for defeat. I wanted to raise the question of how we think about possibility and the defeat of possibility, retrospectively. In particular, can we really accept our defeat as evidence of the unripeness of capitalism for revolution? Doesn't defeat or, at least, the form that defeat has taken render capitalism less ripe for future revolution? In making such assessments do we run the risk of imposing a false necessity upon history, and treating accomplished fact as inevitable? Reflecting on the politics of the 1970s, your book does not shrink from a recognition of defeat. But to what extent might we say that the limitations of our past politics are responsible for the present—in other words, to what extent might it not simply have been the case that "someone else won," but also that we won in ways we did not expect to, and which now trouble us? Even the right-wing today seems to have been molded in important ways by the experience of the 1960s and 1970s radical left, not only in the sense that the right was forced to make concessions, but also in the ways that radical politics of the past have been stabilized, as a new status quo. Indeed, it is this ability to stabilize the status quo that we truly refer to when we speak of the strength of the right. Doesn't history task us with the unpleasant necessity of taking responsibility for the present? In what ways do you think your book does this?

ME: I do not think we can let ourselves off the hook, nor should we delude ourselves into thinking that the current situation has nothing to do with what we did. We should not delude ourselves into thinking that the current situation resulted only from what we failed to do, and not also from what we actually participated in. We cannot only give ourselves credit for good things and let ourselves off for the bad things. We are part of it. That said, there needs to be a sense of proportion: There are some things the Left had control over, and many we did not. To assess the histories of social movements, you need to understand what the potentialities were at a given moment, and the extent to which these possibilities were realized.

I do not think Marx, for instance, was responsible for the failures of the 1848 revolutions. Some of what Marx said and did could have affected the outcome in some way, but fundamentally it was an issue of the balance of forces at the time. Of course, the failures of the Left worldwide have something to do with why the beginning of the 21st century looks the way it does. The U.S. Left in the 1970s were in a position to change the outcome of some political battles that took place between then and now, but certainly not all of them. Even with all the thought and energy so many of us expended, the fact is that we did not become powerful enough to decisively impact the overall balance of forces. So exactly how much change we could have effected is a matter of ongoing debate, and one that is not simply a question of historical "facts." So, yours is a question with various moral, political, and philosophical dimensions. Struggling for the right sense of historical proportion is, after all, ultimately a matter of political judgment. | **P**

Transcribed by Ana Lilia Torres

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is natural, America is natural, the peacefulness of America is natural. But one-fourth of all the world's prisoners are in the United States. That's part of the river of blood. Sub-Saharan Africa is today's Auschwitz—that too is part of the river of blood. Then there are the more slowly moving rivers of blood. For instance, many of your generation will contract diabetes in your 40s or early 50s as a result of not being able to cope with alienation, with one's sense of powerlessness. If you look at history, it is clear that the U.S. is in decline. Either it will go the way of England, through steady, gradual violence, or it will go the way of Nazi Germany, throwing bombs this way and that. I am not happy to say this, but I think it is more likely the U.S. will go the second way. But we might yet have some impact on that. We cannot stop a third world war, but we can make a difference as to whether that war kills 60 million or 600 million. To live your life the right way and keep the struggle going means surrounding yourself with others of the same temperament. And this means avoiding involvement in reform struggles. Those struggles can be ways for people to learn what the system is made of and how to organize against it, but only for that. We do have to meet people where they are, but we can't simply sit down with them, and leave it at that. It is no good just to stand outside and shout at people and pass out fliers.

Q & A

Mark, you mentioned that you support Obama, and that your goal is to make capitalism gentler through a version of Social Democracy parallel to Europe. Why do you think it is unimportant to overcome capitalism? Why do you favor a stronger welfare state? Isn't welfare state capitalism something your generation rebelled against?

MR: People basically tend to be lazy and apolitical. They do not like to sit in meetings, and socialism means a lot of meetings. Capitalism in one form or another is going to be around for a while, so my attitude is, why not try to control it as best we can through the government, understood as an instrument of the collective will of the people? We cannot ignore the fact that every country except Cuba, which still calls itself communist, has gone for capitalism. China is another example. I would like to overthrow the whole thing. I hate it all. I think capitalism is terrible and private property is absurd. But it isn't going to happen, because people don't want to sit in meetings! They just want to be left alone! So I think we should only strive to control things a little better.

ON: As suggested in the Evo Morales quotation I read, I would question the idea that capitalism and nature are compatible, or even that capitalism can be reformed in such a way as to make it compatible. One of the slogans we had back then was, "Be realistic, demand the impossible." I still believe in this slogan. In a way, the only realistic perspective now may be that capitalism is incompatible with nature and that it cannot be reformed. Certainly, it is incompatible with democracy. If there is not that drive to question the whole thing, I don't believe the movement can have the energy it needs.

These sorts of discussions tend to get hung up on ideology, when we should be focusing on what we have to do next. We are decentralized now. No one is reporting to a central party—we are just doing the next right thing in front of our group. It seems we are missing a prime opportunity when 40 or 50 thousand are recapturing the streets in Germany, Spain, Greece, Iceland, and so on. Where are we? In February 2003 we had 15 million in the streets around the world. How could we recapture that?

TW: To put that into perspective, we have to look at politics, society, and history in terms of class struggle. But this does not mean that the class struggle will necessarily and inevitably result in utopia. So we have to struggle inside the Democratic Party, and we have to struggle outside the Democratic Party. We have to be a part of the struggle between private and public, between the interest of the masses and the interest of the few.

ON: I think you are right to say that there is a lot happening right now, and that rather than relying on one organization, it is decentralized, which means that it cannot all get screwed up at a stroke in the way that SDS did. In the 1950s, I never would have expected the sudden burst we experienced in the 1960s, so the impossible does happen, and happens suddenly. It is not going to come from where we expect it. So, we talk about the long haul, and the work we do now in different ways is the seedbed, so that when that spark happens I think it is going to be greater than the 1960s. The result of the movement of our time is that we put Obama into office. This shows that there is a progressive majority in the U.S. Now, of course, that movement has been utterly and horribly betrayed, but the fact that there was that movement is important. What we need now is a movement that is not betrayed, that is not top-down.

[Questioner interjects:] *Just to add on to that, talking about "the spark" that would be needed: If Obama gets assassinated, cities will burn. If the draft were reinstated, we would see a lot more people out for events such as this.*

MR: Absolutely—they should reinstate the draft. I mean, I will not be drafted, but my grandchildren might be, and I would still say that the draft should be reinstated if it provides that spark.

The New Left, and the new New Left, seems to be inherently marginal in its politics. It seems people are saying that if we work completely outside the system, that's a big red flag to working class groups. But how do we negotiate the fact that working within the system restricts the tactics available to us?

AS: It is a question of leadership. First, if we say that there should be no leadership, or only weak leadership, so as to avoid becoming bureaucratized, this will only allow rotten leadership to dominate. The struggle is to develop leadership that is beholden to the people they represent. This was a critical aspect of the Cultural Revolution in China, which no one has spoken about here, even though it was one of the most inspiring things to occur the 1960s. The reason to get involved in these reform struggles is to learn, teach, and to try to build collectives and movements that will last. Optimism is key, but one must not become isolated from the real struggle, from authentic rank-and-file people. Otherwise, one gets cynical. Such despair and cynicism are a middle class luxury, a luxury of intellectuals. People in the Congo do not have the luxury of being cynical. They must fight for their lives every minute of every day.

Regarding the organizations you worked for in the 1960s, do you think their failures were necessary, or in some way unavoidable? Why? What were the failures, exactly?

AS: I do not like the words "necessary" or "inevitable." All truths are probabilistic. We should remember that the Left itself, worldwide, was in retreat at the time. The revolutionary upsurge in 1968 was more like a death rattle. The underlying processes that led to the collapse of communism in China and Russia were already in place. But I don't know that it was completely defeated. I'm still here. The people on this panel are still trying to do something. Hundreds of thousands of people became schoolteachers, social workers, and community organizers. Many have attempted to spread at least some aspects of Marx's ideas, whether self-consciously or not. There are ebbs and flows. The question is whether you can nurture that small part of it that is more advanced, so that when these moments that Osha talked about do come, we have a base among common people and are in a position to take advantage of them. About the 1960s, I would argue that it was a failure of the campus movement to reach out to the community. That was only the internal weakness, though. As to as why it shrunk, that was bound happen with the world situation the way it was.

TW: There's always a tension in Marx between his determinism, on the one hand, and his dialectic of the struggle, on the other. So you can look at capitalism and say, "They control everything. The ruling class runs everything. We can't fight it. There's nothing we can do." But Marx is also saying that the system itself, by its very nature, promotes and even requires rebellion. There is a struggle, essentially a class struggle, and each individual decides how he or she wants to be part of it.

ON: Necessity is only retrospective. At the time we did not know what was possible, and there is a freedom in the moment that disappears retrospectively. Obviously what happened can be traced to some set of causes, but there is also a realm of freedom. How large it is, one does not know until one tries to realize it. At the time, we tried to pursue it, without knowing entirely what it was.

With the Obama movement, and with other movements as well, the discourse centers on the purported values of America's "middle class." I was wondering whether what Marx wrote, and in particular the categories he developed in his critique of society, are relevant today with respect to political practice, and to forms of organizing that seek to oppose capitalism?

TW: The concepts of Marx have survived surprisingly well. But terminology itself does not matter so much and, frankly, there is no reason to impose Marx's 19th century language on the present. However, the concepts of class struggle, the idea that the money has gotten into the hands of a tiny elite at the expense of the many, that the economic system is bound for collapse—obviously, that is what we need to be talking about.

ON: I always tended to think of things in terms of "the system," which, though it does not sound like it, is Marxist to the degree it underscores how the commodity form of capitalism penetrates all aspects of our lives, and needs to be challenged from within all of these aspects. The shorthand for me has always been that the analysis is Marxist but the practice is anarchist. I try to understand economics, but I cannot—the labor theory of value, the falling rate of profit—I just don't know. What matters to me about Marxism is that it seems to get at how capitalism is going to have problems of overproduction and commodification. But we don't just have Marx's categories to worry about, because we are also trying to find a language that speaks to the people I mentioned before, the people who come in to my neighborhood justice clinic. I have to ask myself, How am I going to talk to them? I can have all this shit in my head, but am I going to talk to them about it? We need a language that reaches people, a practice that reaches people. This is a lot more important than whether that practice leans more toward Marxism or anarchism.

AS: Marx's ideas are important and valuable. It may be fine to use different words, or a different set of terminology, but when we use those different words we risk diluting the concepts. And I think the concepts and categories of Marx hold up to this day.

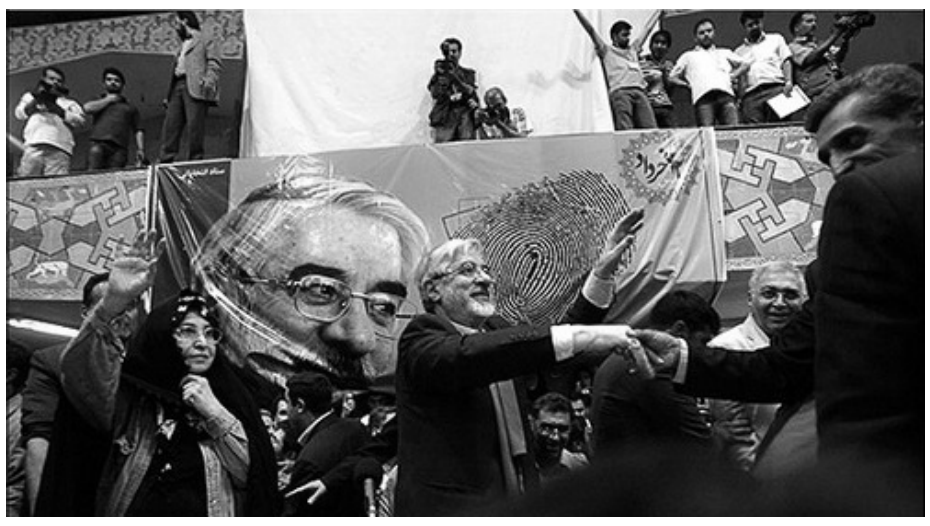
MR: As I said before, my goal, which I hope others will join, is Social Democracy. Its struggle has always been the struggle of capital and labor. We are so far from Social Democracy in this country right now because capitalism has triumphed to such a great extent and organized labor is powerless, or has given in. It has to be capital versus labor, but what words we use for it, I don't know. Right now, we have a crisis of capitalism. The only thing that has ever successfully fought capitalism is labor. But, you know, we can call it whatever we want. I don't know.

I have to say, talking about all of this here with these guys tonight, it reminds me of an old joke: A man covered only in plastic wrap walks in to see a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist takes one look at him and says, "I can clearly see you're nuts." | **P**

Transcribed by Jacob Cayia and Carl Hess

Lessons from the elections

Eric Stoner



Mir-Hossein Mousavi at a Green Movement rally in Iran, 2009.

IN A STRANGE WAY, the debate over whether the American left should support the Green Movement in Iran resembles the arguments that took place in progressive circles before the 2008 presidential elections in the United States, and that reemerged in the recent midterm elections. Those in the Obama camp either believed him to be their savior, taking his every word as gospel, or, if they had a more sober political outlook, simply resorted to some version of the tired "lesser of two evils" argument. If elected, this crowd contended, Obama would at least be more open to the progressive perspective than McCain, which was reason enough to vote for him. It was argued that the threat posed by a Republican victory was so great that the various factions on the Left needed to put aside their differences until after Obama was elected. At that point, he would reveal his true progressive self, and if that did not happen, at least there would be a more reasonable partner to negotiate with in the White House, who could be pressured to move to the Left. Meanwhile, anyone who decided to critique Obama from the Left by saying that his proposed policies—which left much to be desired, to put it mildly—should have had a greater bearing on one's behavior in the voting booth than his elocution, were seen by Obama's supporters as traitors or idealists totally out of touch with political reality.

In the end, many on the Left begrudgingly cast their ballots for Obama even though he consistently moved to the right during the campaign—backing the massive, hugely unpopular bailout of Wall Street, withdrawing his support for a single-payer universal health care system, and calling for a larger military, with more troops in Afghanistan and more Predator drone attacks in Pakistan. The results of this compromise are now evident. Since Obama was elected he has, not surprisingly, continued down the treacherous path he campaigned on and the sense of hope and change that was ever-present during his ascent is now difficult to find. Indeed, as seen during the midterm elections last month, most leftists fell into a pattern of recrimination and resignation similar to the lead-up to the presidential election, only this time a widespread melancholy had replaced the euphoric hope of 2008.

The differences between the candidates in Iran's presidential election last year were far starker than the differences Americans faced when voting for Obama or McCain in 2008. President Ahmadinejad is a world-class demagogue and his government has been extremely repressive, committing widespread human rights abuses and imprisoning, torturing, and killing those who voice dissent. Mir Hossein Mousavi, on the other hand, has generally advocated for greater political and social freedoms for all Iranians. Given this contrast, many argued that the Green Movement should be uncritically supported because, if nothing else, getting Mousavi in power would at least give the Iranian left some "breathing room" to organize. In turn, little tolerance has been shown by many supporters of the Green Movement for those who chose to point out the faults of Mousavi or the other presidential contenders. When it comes to economic policy, the difference between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi is particularly opaque. Though 60 to 70 percent of the Iranian economy is still nationalized, there is little evidence to support the position, argued by some on the American left, that Ahmadinejad is a bulwark against the destructive forces of neoliberalism. On the contrary, as critics have documented in extensive detail, since assuming the presidency in 2005 Ahmadinejad has crushed organized labor, enthusiastically privatized state assets, and courted foreign investment.

The leaders of the Green Movement, to the extent that there are leaders, have said remarkably little—apart from supporting the right of labor to organize, which would be an important victory—about what they would do differently. In fact, the little that is known about their positions would seem to indicate that, if not true believers, they are at least open to the ideology of neoliberalism. While supporters of Mousavi have pointed favorably to his record on economic issues during his tenure as prime minister in the 1980s, his most influential financial backer during his run for president last year was Hashemi Rafsanjani, the billionaire cleric and former president of Iran, who is an outspoken advocate of "free market" reforms. Medhi Karroubi, another presidential candidate who is now a leading figure in the Green Movement, embraced neoliberalism even more openly during the campaign. According to Iranian political analyst Rostam Pourzal, the centerpiece of his economic platform "consisted of suggested first steps towards de-nationalization of Iran's oil industry. The scheme was devised by the candidate's chief economic advisor, a self-described Milton Friedman devotee named Masoud Nili."[1]

Despite these ominous signs, many supporters of the Green Movement held that pushing Mousavi to clarify his economic ideas would only further split the Iranian left, so that any concerns with his political shortcomings should be dealt with only when the democratic movement prevails. However, ignoring where Mousavi and Karroubi fall short in the name of unity, and failing to push them to emphatically reject neoliberalism, reveal misguided and dangerous politics. Indeed, the most advantageous time for everyday citizens to get politicians to address their concerns is while they are running for office or leading a movement for political reform, as this is when politicians are most vulnerable and in need of broad support. Once they have gained power—especially if they've done so without addressing the demands of a particular sector of society—there is little incentive for them to change course.

There is no better time for Iran's working class to make its voice heard than now. Mousavi and the Green Movement are in desperate need of a boost. At the end of last April, Mousavi released a video statement urging workers and teachers to join the cause, but any attempts to recapture the momentum of the summer of 2009 have proven unsuccessful. Along with this, leftists internationally have by and large lost interest, with reports of developments in the Green Movement becoming fewer and farther between. For precisely this reason, the Iranian labor movement is poised to pressure Mousavi by making their support for him contingent on his publicly rejecting neoliberalism and seriously addressing the demands of the working class. If he refuses, Iranians should begin promoting new leaders that more fully embrace their goals, or better yet, start creating alternative economic institutions themselves.

In recent decades, many nonviolent movements that have successfully brought down repressive governments or overturned fraudulent elections have made the mistake of not paying due attention to economics, and paid a heavy price. When Solidarity came to power in Poland in 1988, for example, its leaders abandoned the progressive economic program that they had promoted since the beginning of their struggle, which included converting state-run industries into worker cooperatives, and adopted a toxic mix of neoliberal economic reforms. These included eliminating price controls, slashing subsidies, and selling off state-owned mines, shipyards and factories to the private sector. As a result, the country's economy took a nosedive: industrial production plummeted, unemployment soared, and the percentage of the population living in poverty rose dramatically. Hence, Solidarity's victory was only partial. Polish workers gained political freedoms, but only by constraining their economic freedom in many ways.

If the Green Movement hopes to avoid irrelevance, on the one hand, and a problematic "victory" won only through a Faustian bargain, on the other, those involved must make the interests of working people much more central to their struggle by explicitly raising the banner of economic justice. The ultimate defeat of the Green Movement in the elections deepens, rather than diminishes, the significance of this lesson. Otherwise, Iranians may establish a government that is more democratic on the surface, only to be quickly disappointed to find their lives constrained anew by corporations, which are profoundly undemocratic institutions. To take but one example, freedom of speech, and especially a free press, cannot truly exist when a handful of corporate giants with an interest in maintaining the status quo control of virtually everything read, heard, or seen in the media. As those involved in the Green Movement continue their struggle for political and social freedoms, they should not downplay the importance of having democratic control of the workplace.

To ignore questions of economic policy is not a wise strategic move for the opposition in Iran, but is evidence of a lack of understanding regarding the true threat that neoliberalism poses to real democracy. Now is the time, both in the U.S. and Iran, for leftists to draw a line in the sand, to stop making concessions at every turn in the interest of "pragmatism," and to struggle for the society they truly want to live in—not some uninspiring, deeply compromised alternative. | **P**

1. Rostam Pourzal, "Iran's Business Elite, Too, Is a 'Dissident,'" *MRZine,* June 27, 2009 <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2009/pourzal270609.html>.

Rethinking the New Left

Osha Neumann, Mark Rudd, Tim Wohlforth, Alan Spector

On November 9, 2010, Platypus hosted the public forum, "Rethinking the New Left," moderated by Spencer A. Leonard. The panel consisted of Osha Neumann, a former member of the New York anarchist group in the 1960s, Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers; Mark Rudd, former member and national secretary of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and later a member of the Weather Underground; Tim Wohlforth, founder and national secretary of the Young Socialist Alliance in 1959; and Alan Spector, a full-time organizer for SDS for more than five years in the 1960s.

Opening remarks

Osha Neumann: First, I wanted to say something about the structure of this event, because I think form gives meaning as much as content. I wrote the organizers of the panel when I found out the lineup: "Goodness gracious, this feels like a blast from the past! No women, no people of color—What could come out of a panel like this?" They wrote me back saying,

> We are primarily interested in reflecting on political experience, more than on identity, so we did not make those concerns determinative. As it happens, a black activist and some women were invited to participate, and some will likely participate in the sister panel to this one, on the radical turn in the 1970s. But none could make it for this panel.

This is a very old problem. It makes it easy to universalize our experience, to make a white experience into a universal experience. I know this gets at the contentious issue of identity politics, but I have always felt that you cannot get to the universal if you bypass the particular. You cannot get to a unified movement by doing an end-run around identity.

Now, about the general form of these panels at universities. To hear a bunch of guys talking on, fanning their peacock tails of intellect—in the old days I would have thought this lacked the urgency and connection to action that I found absolutely crucial. My impulse would have been to get up from my seat and shout at this panel, "Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker!" I'm not going to do that now, but I still remain frustrated with theory that has nothing to do with practice. It is a lot safer just to talk things over than it is to go out on the streets and do something. However, I do think that our fixation on the propaganda of the deed also became a problem for the movement.

In the 1960s, we had a movement but not a crisis of capitalism, and now we have a crisis of capitalism, but no movement. Certainly we have no movement adequate to our situation now, a movement capable of turning the current crisis into an opportunity. I believe this is what lies behind the thinking of this panel. It is presented rather neutrally, but I have a feeling that our actions back then are somehow being blamed for the lack of a movement now. It is claimed that it was our fault—our expressive, narcissistic, thrill-seeking, confrontational politics never targeted capitalism, never did the hard work of organizing, and so on. I have this feeling because one of the questions for this panel spoke of the liquidation of the Left, worldwide, during and after the 1960s. At this point, I must rescind my earlier reluctance, stand up, and shout: "That's bullshit, and you know it!"

First of all, it is wrong to say that we liquidated a pre-existing left. In the 1950s, the Left was moribund. There was nothing to be liquidated. The Old Left had already self-liquidated, or else was liquidated by McCarthyism. Secondly, how can one say that the Left has been liquidated, *worldwide*? Just look at what is happening in France, in Greece, in Latin America. In some ways the Left is stronger than ever in Bolivia, Venezuela, and Chile, where it has gained power. Even in the U.S. I would not say that the Left has been liquidated, only that it has been dispersed. It has burst open like a seedpod, spreading many different movements. Anyway, *the* movement was never that unified, even back then.

However, this does not mean that I am opposed to analyzing the shortcomings of the movement in the 1960s. Indeed, I have made my own list of some of the failures back then. We failed to reign in the loosened id when it led us to ignore the warning signs that we were in danger of self-destruction. We failed to marry reason with imagination, and leaven imagination with reason. We assumed a vocabulary and practice derived from other peoples' struggles, and assumed it would work in our situation. We relied too much on action and organizing. We idolized those who took up the gun and had contempt for any who hesitated or compromised. We swept away the distinction between the personal and the political, without questioning the degree to which we thereby limited our appeal to those who still had to actually live within roles, and who thus valued their privacy. Finally, we failed to find a way to expand and deepen our base while retaining our militancy.

But our mistakes were linked to our strengths, and both were rooted in the fact that we were a movement of outsiders to the system. We did not consist of the working class, those embedded in the system and whose lives were shaped by the necessity of being a part of it. There was no possibility of a general strike, as the workforce continued largely to be satisfied—it functioned and was rewarded. Because it came from the outside, the movement could be total. It rejected all aspects of the self-regimentation and regulation required to be a good worker, citizen, and family member. But this meant that participation was restricted to those who could make a complete break. The problem was that our revolt against reason then took the shape of this preference for action over theory, the demand for immediate gratification, and the thrill of direct action. We were unable, at the same time, to shout "freedom now," and "freedom not quite yet."

We thought we were incandescent. It was thrilling to be alive, to feel ourselves as part of a movement of liberation, to dedicate our lives to that movement, to be caught up in the urgency of transformation of ourselves and lives and planet, to take risks, to transgress, to feel a new love, and to feel a new rage. I do not want to romanticize this period, but there was a great deal within the movement that was and remains profound, moving, and true. I do not believe that, had we done it right, somehow everything would have been different. There were historical limitations. The system was too strong. It delivered the goods. The conditions were not ripe for revolution.

As for how things stand now, the most novel aspect of the current situation is the crisis of nature. Human beings are now becoming a problem for the planet. We now fear our species could become endangered. Reflecting on this, I want to end with a quote from Evo Morales, the Bolivian President. He says, "For Bolivians and for indigenous peoples, the idea is to live well... Capitalism to live *better* pillages resources in an unbridled manner, exploits the children of mother earth.... [It] destroys nature.... [and] causes so much damage to humanity." He goes on:

> We have two paths: either Pachamama, or death. We have two paths: either capitalism dies, or Mother Earth dies. Either capitalism lives, or Mother Earth lives. Of course, brothers and sisters, we are here for life, for humanity, and for the rights of Mother Earth. Long live the rights of Mother Earth! Death to capitalism!

When Morales speaks of the need to live well, rather than to live better, I feel the vivifying presence of that utopian dream of a liberated and emancipated reality that, for me, was the best part of the 1960s. Would that there could be a movement that captured that, again.

Mark Rudd: In the 1960s we thought world revolution was imminent. We thought that military defeat of the U.S. in Vietnam and elsewhere could lead to the overthrow of imperialism, and we didn't just want to stand on the sidelines cheering it on. We wanted to get involved. At Columbia University I learned from the red diaper babies about organizing, and it paid off after three years: We had this big rebellion. But we took that experience and we perverted it. The lesson we mistakenly drew was that audacity and militancy will gain you support. This was, in essence, an application of Che's foco theory. It is not as though we were just these dumb kids who were impatient. We had a theory, and it was Che's.

So we went from good organizing to bad organizing, in something called Weatherman, which was my faction of SDS. As the last national secretary of SDS, I was involved in the decision to destroy the largest radical student organization, with about 100,000 members, right at the height of the war. Basically, I did the work of the FBI for them, because I mistakenly thought I had a better idea—namely, guerilla warfare.

If there was anything good in the 1960s, it was the development and experience of mass movements, in particular the anti-war movement, and its predecessor, the Civil Rights Movement. What we really need today is for young people to commit to organizing, to growing the movement. The best way to learn how to organize is to study SNCC, in the South. SDS learned from them and used the technique of organizing that was developed by Ella Jo Baker. She organized for the Civil Rights Movement, and she taught the young people in SNCC how to organize. Her method for organizing is rooted in an organizing tradition. Its techniques were passed down from women who had organized rural black churches.

My goal is Social Democracy. I think we need to have a society with a little more compassion and a lot less militarism. We must strive to narrow the gaps and take off the worst edges of capitalism. The best I can think of in the real world is European Social Democracy. That's our goal. We need to turn the Democratic Party into a party of the people, to make it a party representing the opposite pole from capitalism. We can do this through community organizing. We can build a base among the wretched of this country, the half of the population who do not vote. They are the disenfranchised, the people like those in the Mississippi Delta who had been completely cut off from politics. They are out of it and they have given up hope. We need community organizing to build this movement, to force a realignment of the Democratic Party by developing a mass-based movement within the Democratic Party, as was happening in the lead up to the 2008 elections, with the movement around Obama.

Tim Wohlforth: I entered socialist politics in the 1950s, which gives me a somewhat different way of looking at things. It was a dark world, and there were not many of us young socialists. I was searching for a way out of the polarized world of the Cold War. I felt the U.S. stifled civil liberties at home and supported reactionary governments abroad, like Franco's Spain. Yet I also rejected the oppressive totalitarian regimes of the so-called "socialist" states.

For this reason I joined the Young Socialists League, led by Mike Harrington and affiliated with Max Shachtman. I went on to become national secretary of the Young Socialists Alliance, affiliated with James Cannon's Socialist Workers Party. I was a Trotskyist—part of the Old Left to be sure, but a dissident part—and I was young. I could sum up my convictions in three notions, which I now see, retrospectively, as the good, the bad, and the ugly.

I will start with the good. We Trotskyists held that so-called "actually existing socialism" was in fact ruled by a bureaucratic elite, with a poorly functioning command economy, an undemocratic one-party political system, and an all-pervasive secret police. We suspected that these features were characteristic not only of the USSR, but also of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, China, and Vietnam. We have been proven right in this assessment. However, our vision of the future was based on the past. We projected onto the future our idealized vision of the course history might have taken in the 1930s. Once a new economic crisis developed, we were sure the working class would become radicalized, opening up fresh revolutionary opportunities. There was nothing evil about this vision—it was just wrong. Not only did the apocalypse not take place on schedule, but today, as we suffer the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, we find the Left paralyzed and in retreat, while the anger of the people is captured by the extreme right, as seen in something like the Tea Party. That is the bad. As for the ugly: We saw ourselves as a chosen few, professional revolutionaries organized in a disciplined combat party whose program held the key to the victory of the working class. In this sense we remained communists. Since then, this vanguardist notion has led to the splintering of both Trotskyist and Maoist sects and, in many cases, the transformation of political organizations into cults.

The 1960s exploded on the scene in a way none of us could have predicted. The heart of this explosion was the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle against the Vietnam War. The student movement went on its own chaotic, fitful radical way, with the SDS at its center. Our Trotskyist dicta fell on deaf ears. But while the New Left rejected the Old Left, it did not negate it. They were simply uninterested in theoretically understanding the states of the Second World, as it was called, which in those days covered a third of the world's surface.

SDS had ideas of its own. Perhaps the most important of these was the notion of participatory democracy, a form of self-government and decentralized organization based on consensus. This worked quite well on the local level, fitting the mood of students, and providing just the modicum of organization needed for local protest. But it never worked on a national level.

By 1968, the SDS national leadership faced the invasion of the Progressive Labor Party body-snatchers. I remember a young woman getting up at one conference and reciting in singsong fashion,"We must ally with the workers, and not the liberals. I have been working in this factory for the last three weeks, and all the workers agree we must break with the liberals and fight for socialism." That was the Progressive Labor Party (PLP). In reaction to their invasion of SDS, the non-PLP forces broke into warring Maoist factions: Revolutionary Youth Movement-I [RYM-I] (the Weathermen), RYM-II (Michael Klonsky and Bob Avakian), and later, Marlene Dixon's Democratic Workers Party, along with several other groups. They rejected what was good in Trotskyism—the critique of "actually existing socialism"—and thus tended to be more Stalinist than mainstream communism. We all shared a common vision of a socialist future, and we knew students alone were incapable of bringing this future into fruition. The key problem lay, and still lies, in the question of *how*.

During all of this, I was off in my own sect, with our particular interpretation of the Marxist seven seals. Of course, we were there at all the marches, the civil rights demonstrations, and the conferences. Our growth came in the aftermath of the breakup of SDS. We recruited our share of those who felt deserted by SDS. With these new forces we tried something different. We won over some minority students from community colleges. For a while it worked, but the promised labor upsurge never took place. Our recruits dropped out one by one.

Regarding the Civil Rights struggle, neither the Old nor the New Left had much to do with this movement, which emerged from the black masses themselves. I agree with Mark on the importance of SNCC's work in the south. But one of the reasons SNCC worked is that it came out of a movement. It did not try to create a movement out of nothing. When SDS went into the white neighborhoods and tried to organize the white poor through what it called the Economic Research and Action Program (ERAP), when there was not yet a white poor movement, it failed. For all its work, SNCC also failed to produce a lasting organization. Stokely Carmichael turned to black power. Black nationalism rendered itself prey to sectarianism and isolation. This, in turn, led to political collapse. Of course, the black political struggle survived in other, more traditional forms: first, Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition and, now, Obama.

The 1960s were a bubble in history. Everything was possible in the moment. Miraculous events took place. At the time many of us projected this magic into an indefinite future. But the normal always follows the abnormal. We had the opportunity to build a relatively large and sustainable socialist political party in the early 1970s. It might have been more reformist than revolutionary and, certainly, it would have been messy, a diverse party connected to, yet separate from, the Democratic Party. But we flubbed it—all of us.

Alan Spector: Students, from the 1960s up through today, tend to think that social change would come from students. How convenient! In the 1960s we thought the working class itself was disappearing, or that it was weak and helpless. But it did not disappear. Everything continues to be built by workers somewhere. The difference now is that, because of globalization and imperialism, in major parts of the world the working class consists of 15-year-old girls making the shirts that you are wearing, or 18-year-old girls making the computers on which intellectuals write papers about the disappearance of the working class.

Working class struggle never disappeared. What has been mainly discussed here is the white campus Left. This was an important movement, but only one movement. It would take volumes to talk about the black liberation movement, the struggle against racism, and everything else happening in the 1960s.

I do not want to disappoint, but I have not changed at all. I renounce nothing I ever did. I am critical about some aspects of the past, but even then I don't renounce any of it. And I'm not tired.

I was a student at the University of Wisconsin. After graduating, I worked as a full-time chapter organizer for SDS in Boston. What I saw in SDS at that time was a great deal of confusion. I remember one SDS convention in 1968 when the anarchist group Osha was involved in, Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, stood up and denounced the PLP as Stalinist. Some SDS national officers seemed to approve of this. But then they got up, quoted Stalin, and said that the PLP had betrayed his true message. At this the supposedly anti-Stalinist anarchists applauded wildly. At that point I said to myself, "There's something really unprincipled going on here."

The revolutionary Left today is in much worse shape than people realize. I place no hope in reformism. Capitalism leads to fascism and to rivers of blood. I wish reforms might forestall this, but they cannot. And you cannot cross that river of blood without getting bloody yourself. The world left movement probably began its decline in the 1950s. There was a burst of optimism in the 1960s, but now we see Vietnam and China welcoming Wal-Mart. As a world movement the Left is weak. There are scattered movements here and there, but I'm not particularly optimistic about Evo Morales or Hugo Chavez.

The white campus movement reached its limit by 1968–69. It had to reach out to the working class. This meant more than simply telling white workers, "We want to get you more money." It meant reaching out to the community as a whole, which was black and Latino, by the way. The failure to do that, the failure to fight racism and the corresponding capitulation to separatism, was a key factor in the decline of the Left.

Beyond this, there were the drugs. Woodstock hurt the movement. The Beatles tailed the movement, they didn't build it, and the bosses found ways to get on with the counterculture. There were also the elections and the illusory feeling that the defeat of Nixon would set things right. Finally, the devastating impact of the Weather Underground on the movement cannot be overestimated. It was difficult to go to steelworkers in Pittsburgh and press them to oppose the war the day after some Weatherwoman took her blouse off and ran through a high school shouting, "Free yourselves! Free yourselves!" Thank God that nail bomb the Weathermen put at Fort Dix did not go off. If it had and the newspapers ran photos of police dragging the bodies out of the rubble, police oppression against us would be the least of our worries: The masses themselves would have beat the crap out of us.

As for today, you don't have to choose between running and hiding or putting yourself out there as a martyr. There's a lot going on today. The revolution will not happen tomorrow, but we cannot fool ourselves: This system has to come down, and it is not going to come down through elections, countercultural institutions, or terrorism. There's no easy way out. There is only the long struggle.

Panelists' responses

TW: The central lesson of the 1960s was that devoting your political activity to the idea of creating a revolution that is not on the agenda, and which is not going to be on the agenda in this country for the foreseeable future, is tantamount to taking talented, thoughtful people and steering them into a blind alley. Change occurs, but generally not through spectacular revolution. Rather, change has been primarily incremental. I used to attack the American Communist Party constantly, but at its best the Party recognized that there is no contradiction between favoring an alternative to capitalism and acting in the actual political processes of the working class. No workers would have ever turned to socialism if socialists had not actually fought for immediate changes in their real life.

ON: About organizing, I wonder if the SNCC model is what's needed today. There's a less heroic story of organizing in Barack Obama's book, *Dreams from My Father*. It is about organizing right here in Chicago and it has a decidedly downbeat tone, involving lots of door-to-door soliciting that doesn't really pay off. This balance between "freedom now" and "freedom not quite yet" is still something we have not mastered. Yes, we have to be in it for the long haul. But there are breaks, moments of enlightenment, unexpected breakthroughs of utopian vision, and I am not prepared to discard that aspect of the revolution. As a public interest lawyer, I supervise what we call a neighborhood justice clinic for low and no-income people. People suffering from this crisis are constantly streaming into our office and every one of them has got a tale to tell. They all feel isolated but I cannot, for the life of me, direct them to any political project. Next door to us is something actually called The Long Haul—an anarchist infoshop started by Al Haber. The anarchists are these young guys that drop by sometimes and I love them all. They go out to demonstrations, put fliers out, and so on. They plant community gardens. But there's no connection between them and the people I see at my clinic. Somehow there has to be that. There has to be something to offer, but I have got no damn idea what that is.

AS: I don't want anybody to assume I was taking a pessimistic tack. The person who brings you bad news, the doctor or nurse who says that you are about to go through some horrible pain, but we think you can make it, that's the optimist. The person who says, "Let's have a Christmas party for you," even though it's July, is saying that he doubts you will live to see December. Having an imagination means having the ability to understand that the world can be a whole lot worse than you ever thought. Just look at Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and the 300,000 people that died there in five short minutes. If you took those bodies and laid them end-to-end, it would stretch from Chicago to Milwaukee and back. The other side of it, though, is that things can be much better than you could ever imagine. The most powerful weapon the oppressors have is their ability to convince people that what exists is natural: Whiteness

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