

Books about yesterday's activism for activists of tomorrow

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Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, eds. *"Takin' It to the Streets": A Sixties Reader, Second Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 533 pages.

Max Elbaum. *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*. London: Verso, 2002. 370 pages, including index.

Barry Sheppard. *The Party, A Political Memoir, The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988, Volume 1: The Sixties*. Australia: Resistance Books, 2005 (distributed in the U.S. by Haymarket Books). 354 pages, including indexes.

I remember keenly, when I was a young radical activist of the "new left" in the 1960s, the mixed feelings that many of my comrades and I had regarding the left-wing activists who had gone before, particularly those still around who were trying to "teach" us something.

They had lost - it appeared that they had lost spectacularly, since their "old left" organizations and influence seemed to have faded away into almost nothing. There were some fine old traditions, perhaps, but these were tainted by defeat and seemed ill-suited to attract the new wave of activists. Many of our generation were prepared to "put our bodies on the line" to advance the civil rights struggle against racial segregation, with moral intensity and little patience for what sounded to us like abstract theorizing. In reaction to the horrors of Vietnam, many of us were inclined to say "make love, not war" - which was hardly consistent with the left-wing rhetoric of the 1930s. While some of the old-timers seemed delighted that we younger ones were in motion in large numbers, some were also impatient with our lack of experience and were inclined to lecture us about the need to accept the wisdom they wished to impart. And we were not always inclined to listen to such stuff.

Our youthful activism proved capable of cracking the stultifying cultural conformism of the 1950s and of tilting politics leftward, but more and more of us concluded that what we were doing was not adequate. We discovered limits in what we were accomplishing as racism persisted in multiple dimensions, as the war in Vietnam continued and appeared to be rooted in much larger patterns of foreign policy and global power, and as we became increasingly aware of other injustices and of interconnections between the various wrongs that we were seeking to set aright.

Some of us turned hungrily, then, to try to understand the experience of the "old left" - the amazing triumphs of Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Party, coupled with the Industrial Workers of the World, during the first two decades of the 20th century, also brooding over the reasons for their

failure; the mighty upsurge of the 1930s that was apparently spearheaded by the Communist Party, led by the likes of Earl Browder and William Z. Foster, but in which others on the left (various kinds of socialists - some followers of Norman Thomas, some followers of Leon Trotsky, but many others as well) also helped to change the course of history, at least for a while, until the mighty red tide was pushed back by an even mightier combination of post-World War II prosperity and Cold War anti-Communism. It was in this 1950s reality of quiescence, conservatism, and conformity that we had grown up within - and it was this reality that we had successfully disrupted. But we now wanted to learn, some of us, from those who had gone before, in order to learn from their successes and from their mistakes, in the hope that we might ultimately do better than they had.

We accomplished much from the 1960s into the 1980s. Despite conservative backlash and neo-conservative onslaught, the culture and consciousness of masses of people in our society have never flowed back to where they were in the 1950s. And yet, it could be argued, we lost spectacularly - certainly when our accomplishments are measured by our aspirations. And certainly this seems the case when we survey the innumerable injustices, dangers, and atrocities that are so much a part of the 21st century. But thanks to relentless capitalist realities, new waves of discontent, protest, and radicalism have been generated and will be generated. And as they accumulate experiences of their own and become more serious about their politics, some of the young activists born in the aftermath of the Vietnam era will want to know what happened in the earlier decades that were so central to the lives of those born in the aftermath of World War II.

The three volumes examined here are useful sources on the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s for thoughtful young activists of today and tomorrow. At the same time, they are quite different from each other. The volume by Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines is a massive compilation of documents (designed for college courses) seeking to embrace a far more multi-faceted reality than the other two. The most readable and engaging, in some ways, is the straightforward memoir by Barry Sheppard - one person telling his own story as best he can remember (and he remembers quite a lot) - although, since it is the first of two volumes, we by no means get the whole story. In some ways the most complete and analytically satisfying volume is the historical account offered by Max Elbaum, another thoughtful participant in the developments he describes.

The New Left and Beyond

For those interested in the “new left” of the 1960s, the Bloom/Breines anthology is essential reading, and Elbaum also has much to offer. Sheppard - a youthful recruit to an “old left” current - can only offer the critical, sometimes dismissive comments of an outsider, the strengths of his book lying elsewhere.

“Images of the 1950s are distinct: white middle-class families, suburban homes, backyard barbecues, big American cars with tail fins, Little League and Girl Scouts, peace, prosperity, and harmony,” write Bloom and Breines at the beginning of their anthology. “So, too, the images of the 1960s: civil rights sit-ins, urban violence, antiwar demonstrations, Black Power salutes, hippie love-ins, draft card burnings, death and destruction in Vietnam, police riots in Chicago, obscenities, killings at Kent State and Jackson State universities.”

Describing a social reality in the United States largely characterized, in the decade following World War II, by a stifling cultural and political conformism - rooted largely in Cold War anti-Communism, an increasingly out-of-control consumerism, and a variety of racial and sexual taboos - Bloom and Breines explain:

By the early 1960s the postwar consensus had run its course. National and world events, from

college campuses to Vietnam, brought many of the basic tenets of American life into sharp consideration. "We are people of this generation," began the Port Huron Statement, the 1962 founding statement of the new left Students for a Democratic Society [SDS], "bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit."

This handful of students and countless others - women, blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, gays - found little in 1950s mainstream culture and politics to explain the inequalities, restrictions, and discontent, or to enable them to analyze the new world. The underground critiques of the 1950s [provided by the so-called "beatniks" as well as other maverick cultural figures and social critics], as well as movements such as civil rights, offered the first hints of new perspectives and new possibilities. The young and some of the old - critics of the 1950s consensus or apostates from it - would join to confront the new realities of the era. And "the sixties" began.

What follows the editors' thoughtful introduction is an incredibly rich collection of materials. The first section, quite appropriately, focuses on the civil rights movement: Martin Luther King, Jr. explaining the power of non-violent protest, James Farmer of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) describing the Freedom Rides, various young activists of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) giving voice to their experience in struggle. The next section on the student movement includes excerpts from the SDS "Port Huron Statement," radical sociologist C. Wright Mills's "Letter to the New Left," materials on early community organizing efforts and the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement, and more. The next section on black nationalism and ethnic consciousness explores the trajectory from Malcolm X to proliferating ghetto uprisings to the Black Panther Party, also indicating the rise of liberation struggles among Latinos, Asian-Americans, and Native-American "Indians." This is followed by a section on the Vietnam war and the anti-war movement.

The next two sections broaden the anthology out in two very different directions. On the one hand, we see manifestations of a very diverse, complex "counter-culture" - involving not only "sex, drugs, rock and roll," but also new paths in religion, experimental communes, not to mention the emergence of hippies and the more political yippies. On the other hand, we see various manifestations of the conservative backlash - the Young Americans for Freedom, the John Birch Society, the Christian Crusade, and such political figures as Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew, George Wallace, Ronald Reagan, and the ominous COINTELPRO - a secret, coordinated government program to spy on and disrupt a variety of organizations associated with dissent, protest, and radical activity. (Some of those trained in this right-wing milieu would truly come into their own during the "Reagan Revolution" and the ascendancy of George W. Bush.)

An entire section is devoted to the amazing and explosive year 1968, and another to the emergence of the multi-faceted women's liberation movement. A final section looks at various aspects of the end of the decade - the Peoples Park struggle, the 1970 protests and killings at Kent State and Jackson State, the rise of the gay liberation movement, the very different counter-cultural events at Woodstock and Altamont, and the beginnings of the environmental movement. The volume ends with the open-ended retrospective by Julius Lester: "Things happened in the Sixties. We didn't make them happen as much as one action produced ten other actions (but the progression was geometric) and we were swept along by it."

This indicates, on the one hand, the tremendous vitality and the phenomenal shifts in the cultural and political climate represented by the 1960s radicalization. But it also suggests political chaos, a complete inability to develop any effective programmatic and strategic orientation capable of replacing the existing power structure with structures that would truly give "power to the people," the stated goal of the radical activists.

As Max Elbaum notes in his invaluable study, “by the fall of 1968, public opinion polls indicated that one million students saw themselves as part of the left, and 368,000 ‘strongly agreed’ on the need for a ‘mass revolutionary party.’” He also notes that in the same period a growing number of radical activists with several years of experience, recognizing the inadequacy of the “new left” organizational amorphousness and programmatic disarray (which caused the virtual collapse of SDS and SNCC), faced “that classic question: ‘What is to be done?’ In grappling with this problem the young revolutionaries of the late 1960s displayed confusion, naiveté, and sometimes downright foolishness. But the more remarkable thing is how doggedly they worked to overcome their own prejudices and limitations; and how many of the issues they identified remain at the top of the progressive agenda today.”

One possibility for the young activists seeking greater political and organizational seriousness was to take a closer look at the so-called “old left.” The most prevalent currents of the “old left,” the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, while seeming to have much greater political savvy and organizational ability than much of the “new left,” however, repelled many of the young activists for more than one reason.

The Communist Party suffered from the Stalinist legacy, with a tainted reputation compounded by a tendency to be uncritical of the USSR as well as sectarian and dismissive toward “new left” activists. Many of the Socialists, on the other hand, were so committed to the fight against “Communist totalitarianism” that it seemed difficult to distinguish between them and employees of the U.S. State Department (particularly since some of them actually were), nor were they above red-baiting those to their left. And both Socialists and Communists of the 1960s were supportive, to a large degree, of the Democratic Party - seen by many of the young activists as not being qualitatively different from the Republican Party.

There was another “old left” current that - for a small but significant number of “new left” activists - seemed better than this: the dissident-Communists associated with the revolutionary perspectives of Leon Trotsky. These perspectives included Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, which saw worker-led democratic revolution spilling over into socialist revolution; an unyielding revolutionary internationalism; and a rejection of the bureaucratic dictatorship represented by the Stalin regime in the USSR. The largest grouping of Trotskyists had gathered in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). This brings us to Barry Sheppard’s *The Party, A Political Memoir*.

Part of the Story

Sheppard’s memoir begins in the mid-1950s and concludes in 1973, the first of two volumes corresponding to his own involvement, which ended in 1988, in SWP. In this book we get a sense of how a relative handful of people—aging Trotskyist veterans and younger activists—utilized certain basic organizational norms and political principles to build a dynamic organization that made a real difference in the United States from the late 1950s to the early 1970s.

At the same time, while providing insights on the personalities and internal workings of U.S. Trotskyism in this period, Sheppard conscientiously seeks to connect the activities of the SWP to the larger historical contexts: the Cold War, the Hungarian revolution, the Algerian war for independence, developments in the Middle East, the “thaw” in the USSR, the mass slaughter of leftists in Indonesia, the Vietnam conflict, the so-called Cultural Revolution in China, the May-June 1968 student-worker rebellion in France, the ill-fated Prague Spring that reached for “socialism with a human face,” and more.

From 1960 to 1973, the SWP and its youth group the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA) grew from about

400 to about 3,000 cadres. They became a significant force in a number of initiatives:

- Fair Play for Cuba Committees, organized to oppose aggressive policies by the U.S. government against Cuba after Fidel Castro and Che Guevara led the Cuban Revolution to triumph in 1959;
- Student Peace Union, which protested against the testing of atomic and hydrogen bombs and the threat to humanity posed by the possibility of nuclear war in the early 1960s;
- Civil rights and black liberation movements, in activities ranging from eyewitness reporting on early challenges to Jim Crow in the South for the SWP's newsweekly, *The Militant*, to honoring black trade unionist E.D. Nixon (who played a pivotal role in the 1955-56 Montgomery Bus Boycott), to helping organize nationwide picketing of Woolworth's stores in support of the 1960 Greensboro lunch-counter sit-ins, to rallying in defense of Robert F. Williams (militant president of the Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP, who advocated armed self-defense by Blacks against the Ku Klux Klan); the SWP also played a special role in helping Malcolm X convey his revolutionary nationalist perspectives more widely than would otherwise have been possible;
- Early stirrings of feminism's "second wave"— from animated early discussion of Frederick Engels's views on gender equality in pre-class societies and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, to involvement with the National Organization for Women and the abortion rights struggle, not to mention the increasingly prominent involvement of women in the SWP and YSA at all levels;
- Socialist electoral challenges to capitalist politics-as-usual, sometimes joining with others on the Left to run left-wing candidates, sometimes running aggressive and colorful campaigns in the name of the SWP, and always using the campaigns, often quite effectively, to promote current social struggles and to win people to socialist ideas;
- The movement to end the war in Vietnam.

In this last initiative, one can find a number of key elements of the SWP's success. The period of the Vietnam war was the first time in U.S. history when a majority of the population shifted from accepting the government's war to opposing it. Mass demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands and reflecting the thinking of millions were organized year after year, by such broad coalitions as the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam and the National Peace Action Coalition, posing a sharp challenge and a growing barrier to the power of pro-war politicians and policymakers.

In the early 1970s, a transition was initiated, resulting in the older central leadership layer, shaped by the 1930s and '40s labor struggles, being replaced by a much younger layer of 1960s activists, led by Carleton College graduate Jack Barnes and his second-in-command Barry Sheppard from Boston University and MIT. Since this volume ends with the SWP's 1973 national convention, the story is interrupted before it goes very, very bad.

The downward slide included a hothouse and disruptively carried-out "industrialization" policy in the late 1970s, which sent almost all cadres into factories regardless of personal, political, or economic realities—an especially serious problem given the relative decline of U.S. industry in the 1980s. It included a romantic fantasy that Fidel Castro's Cuban Communist Party was about to forge a new revolutionary international—"necessitating" a rapid, top-down abandonment of Trotskyist theory. It included a grotesque tightening of "party discipline" that drove hundreds of actual, incipient, and potential dissidents out of the SWP (including a majority of its remaining veterans from the 1930s and '40s)—a campaign which Sheppard helped to implement in its early stages, and of which he was a victim in its later stages. From its glory days of the early 1960s to the late 1970s, it shrank down in

the 1980s and 1990s to a small group with minimal influence.

The SWP seems so incredibly good in Sheppard's book that one naturally wonders how it could have turned out so badly. In fact, Sheppard himself explicitly acknowledges these silences, and he promises to take up such matters in the upcoming volume that deals with the SWP's decline. Even in this first volume, Sheppard begins to introduce a critical note. While the SWP and YSA played a role in early civil rights efforts of the late 1950s and '60s, he suggests that it would have been wise for them to become involved in the 1964 Freedom Summer efforts of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He is critical of the SWP's earlier homophobic tendencies (shared with most of the Left up to the 1970s) and self-critically suggests that its path-breaking reversal of this failed to go far enough. While Sheppard never questions the centrality of the working class as the force that must bring the socialist future into being, he suggests that an overly optimistic notion predominated in the SWP leadership regarding how soon class-conscious workers might be expected to play such a role on the U.S. political scene.

While not pretending to be the final word on the history of American Trotskyism, Sheppard's book is a valuable source for activists (and for scholars), and one looks forward to the continuation of the story in the next volume.

Some of same factors in the story of the SWP's decline, however, will have to coincide with the story that Max Elbaum tells of the rise and fall of "The New Communist Movement," associated with the widespread commitment of a very large layer of "new left" veterans to "Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-tung Thought" and a popular (but divergently interpreted) conception of "Party-Building."

"Party-Building"

Elbaum identifies certain elements in Leninism that attracted a growing number of activists to either its Trotskyist or Maoist variant - "a worldview unmatched in scope, depth and revolutionary lineage" that "revealed the structural roots of (and connections between) war, discrimination, violence and the blocked channels of the country's formally democratic political system. It foregrounded precisely the issues - imperialist war and domestic racism - which topped the 1960s protest agenda." Nor does Elbaum believe this is now obsolete. In his view, there are "three crucial issues that ... remain pivotal to any future attempt at left renewal: commitment to internationalism and anti-imperialism; the centrality of the fight against racism; and the urgency of developing cadre and creating organizations capable of mobilizing working people and the oppressed."

To connect with the actual ideas of Marx and Lenin is not to connect with abstract dogmas developed by divine philosophers. Their perspectives are grounded in the experience, the insights, the lessons learned by generations of revolutionary and working-class activists, brave and visionary men and women of the 19th and early 20th centuries, from Germany, France, Britain, Russia, and beyond. Committing themselves to these perspectives in the 1960s and '70s, many activists sought to become part of a rich tradition that would draw on past wisdom that could help shape a better future. Those who reached out to the "Third World Marxism" to which Elbaum gives such stress sought to draw into their thinking and action, as well, the experience of freedom fighters of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The Leninist perspective "spoke to the widespread feeling that broad mass movements could only consolidate their gains if they were reinforced by a body of cadre who had the theoretical understanding, political commitment and practical skills to navigate the twists and turns of complex political battles." The "new left" activists drawn to the New Communist Movement viewed this as constituting a tremendous advance:

In melding cadre together into a unified organization, Lenin's requirement that every member participate in advancing an agreed-upon program allowed groups to coordinate multisector, nationwide campaigns and fostered genuine camaraderie. The Leninist stricture that every revolutionary must be responsible to a party unit initially served as a positive corrective to the problems many had experienced in looser New Left groups, whose work was badly hurt by the unaccountable actions of media-created leaders or by the refusal of a numerical minority to abide by the will of the majority.

And yet, there was "a dark side of the Force." Elbaum notes that the groups in the New Communist Movement succumbed to "a miniaturized Leninism" in which "sixty-year-old polemics written as guidelines for a party of thousands to interact with a movement of millions were interpreted through the prism of how organizations of hundreds (or even dozens) should interact with movements of thousands (or less)." The result - "mechanical formulas and organizational narrow-mindedness," and consequently the New Communist Movement's "vision of a vanguard party was reduced to the model of a sect."

He concludes that "the most damage was done by Maoism," and he cites three particular problems which he associates with distinctive aspects of "Mao Tse-tung Thought": 1) an "underestimation of the importance of democracy, both within the revolutionary movement and - if and when a revolution succeeds - within the new society"; 2) "belief in a single and true Marxist-Leninist doctrine with an unbroken revolutionary pedigree from 1848 to the present," and that this "one pure tradition" had "defeated a series of deviations since Lenin's time"; and 3) a "disastrous ... tendency to confer vanguard status on a party because it espoused a sanctioned version of Marxism-Leninism rather than because it actually has won the allegiance of workers and the oppressed."

Time and again, the flawed methodology helped to cut across what the activists sought to achieve. "Just when a dose of fresh thinking was needed to transcend the limits of the Stalin-Mao model and expand on the invaluable insights in Lenin's thought, the movement's strongest groups headed in the exact opposite direction." He walks us through the consequent developments, mergers, splits, fusions and confusions of a maddening variety of currents and counter-currents: the Revolutionary Union becoming the Revolutionary Communist Party, with a split-off called the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters evolving into the more reasonable-sounding Freedom Road Socialist Organization; the October League becoming the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist); the League of Revolutionary Black Workers coalescing with others into the short-lived Black Workers Congress; the League of Revolutionary Struggle; the Revolutionary Workers League; the Communist Labor Party; the Communist Workers Party; the Democratic Workers Party; Line of March - all this and much, much more.

And yet, it is a worthwhile journey that he takes us on. Elbaum helps us see what some of these activists did right. There were some serious union organizing and community organizing efforts, crucially important anti-racist work (peppered with some big mistakes), a serious fumbling on the question of women's liberation in some cases admirably corrected (although - for the most part - the same cannot be said regarding gay liberation). One of the most impressive accomplishments of the New Communist Movement was that it "pointed a way toward building a multiracial movement out of a badly segregated U.S. left." What Elbaum calls "Third World Marxism" enhanced the movement's ability to draw in and empower people of color - some of the groups were predominantly non-white, and others were able to break down racial barriers at all organizational levels.

With the collapse of the movement, it was by no means the case that its accomplishments and activists simply evaporated. Veterans of this movement - and the ideas, the training, and the lessons they absorbed - have found their way into a number of trade unions, social movements, and progressive organizations that have an impact within the political and cultural life of the United

States.

The Future

Elbaum projects a positive vision of what the future movement should look like (based on certain brief, almost inadvertent, moments in the history of the New Communist Movement). It is sufficiently striking to justify substantial quotation:

By and large, in the movement's healthiest periods several organizations - both tight-knit cadre groups and other forms - coexisted and interacted while considering themselves part of a common political trend. In such periods the movement was able to field (and train) disciplined bodies of cadre in coordinated campaigns but also to retain flexibility; it also had constant incentive for lively internal debate. Diversity of organizational forms (publishing collectives, research centers, cultural collectives, and broad organizing networks, in addition to local and national cadre formations) along with a dynamic interaction between them supplied (at least to a degree) some of the pressures for democracy and realism that in other situations flowed from a socialist-oriented working class. It freed the movement from pressures to adopt a uniform approach in all sectors during a period where tremendous disparities in consciousness and activity meant that uniformity would be inherently self-defeating.

Elbaum is sufficiently optimistic to add that "for a left confronted by new realities (and willing to face up to the decidedly mixed balance sheet of its own past), fresh analyses, new strategies and new models are required. Developing effective ones will involve drawing on the best of many Marxist and non-Marxist radical traditions, but above all will require a hard-headed look at today's realities, willingness to explore new theoretical terrain, and a good deal of flexibility and experimentation in practical campaigns."

Serious activists seeking to move in such directions in order to change would do well to spend some time to absorb what Bloom and Breines, Sheppard and Elbaum have to offer. It is to be hoped that the young and maturing comrades of today and tomorrow will absorb the best of what we were, will learn from our sad mistakes, and will draw as well from those who came before us - and that this can help them to be better than we were: better in building durable and successful organizations, movements, and struggles; better in interweaving theory and practice in a manner that is creative, open, and principled; better in advancing us to a society of the free and the equal which has been the goal of so many generations of activists.