

I n t e r v i e w s w i t h

MANNING MARABLE

WINONA LADUKE

MICHAEL ALBERT

HOWARD ZINN

BELL HOOKS

Talking About a Revolution

URVASHI VAID

PETER KWONG

NOAM CHOMSKY

BARBARA EHRENREICH

Edited by the South End Press Collective



Press

TALKING ABOUT A REVOLUTION

Interviews with

Michael Albert

Noam Chomsky

Barbara Ehrenreich

bell hooks

Peter Kwong

Winona LaDuke

Manning Marable

Urvashi Vaid

Howard Zinn

South End Press

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SOUTH END PRESS

Introduction

MANY PEOPLE today laugh when talk turns to "revolution," yet 30 years ago, hundreds of thousands of people around the world believed that revolution might well be at hand. From Hanoi to Paris, from Prague to Detroit, from Atlantic City to Mexico City, women and men fought to bring radically new ways of being into the world. While government-sponsored violence quickly, and often fatally, crushed almost all the movements of the late '60s, no amount of violence can ever extinguish the human passion for dignity and justice. We chose the word "revolution" for the title of this book in the hope that it would indicate something of the passion and persistence needed today by all people fighting injustice.

"Revolution" also signifies the scope of the problems that face humanity. Contrary to the popular propaganda that capitalism has triumphed and is providing better and better

life conditions for everyone, this book argues that people's lives are becoming more blighted; our chances at happiness and liberty more lopsided, not less. While the writers and activists interviewed for this book are a diverse group, they share a common understanding that political change must be fundamental, not cosmetic. Especially in the United States—"the land of the free"—income disparities, imprisonment rates, and other health and social indicators document the enormity of the barriers to equality.

One of the biggest obstacles facing movements for radical change is corporate control of the media and, increasingly, of the educational establishment, from kindergarten through graduate school. When multinational conglomerates control the evening news, it's no surprise that coverage of fast-track trade proposals, the international arms trade, or bank mega-mergers—and their true implications for poor and working people—is ignored, while the entertaining distractions of celebrity scandals and mass murders saturate every informational outlet.

This book is being published during an unprecedented period of media consolidation. The "star-making machinery" that singer Joni Mitchell complained about now rules not only the music industry and Hollywood's dream factory, but also the production of TV and print news. Book and magazine publishing, likewise, are relegated to subsidiary status in the info-tainment industry, foraging ground for the "content" that will be turned into made-for-TV movies. Publishers of serious non-fiction, especially those with socialist politics like South End Press, are being sidelined or squashed in the industry's rush to squeeze the bottom line and churn out bestsellers. The foundations of independent intellectual activity are threatened as whole university departments are being bought out by corporate "research" contracts. To cope

with federal funding cutbacks, university presses are publishing biographies of Barbie rather than academic monographs.

Presiding over this culture of capital is the renowned corporate frontman Bill Clinton. The 1992 election of his Democratic National Committee brand of liberalism in the service of private profit created a neutron bomb-like effect: the left was largely turned into a ghost town as the promise of "access" lured progressives to the mirage of Clinton's Washington, D.C. The left's "love affair with Clinton," as Barbara Ehrenreich puts it, dissipated somewhat as more and more people realized how easily he could betray every progressive principle that he had implied he shared, but many liberals stayed firmly in Clinton's camp despite his signing the welfare bill, expanding the death penalty, and banning gay marriages.

The people interviewed in this book have stuck to the principles of social and economic justice articulated by radicals throughout this century. Their lives are described in this introduction not to deify them, but to show that lifelong revolutionary passion is possible to maintain and pass on; that the awful reality of today's inequality can be grappled with if one is able to learn from history and remain optimistic about the future. All of these thinkers have dedicated at least the past two or three decades of their lives to organizing for progressive change. Noam Chomsky made his first public radical stand as a ten-year-old in opposition to Spanish fascism. More importantly, none of them has lost faith in the power of working and poor people to change society, even in the face of the rapidly expanding corporatization of the world.

The Civil Rights movement forged the consciousness of many of the contributors to this book. In the late '50s and

early '60s, Howard Zinn was supporting activist students and colleagues as a faculty member at Spelman College in Atlanta. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral was the politicizing moment for Manning Marable, then 17 years old and sent to Atlanta to cover the funeral for his Dayton, Ohio, Black community newspaper. In small-town Kentucky, bell hooks experienced school desegregation first-hand. Seeing white resistance to desegregation, hooks had "a real awakening moment...to see that white supremacy as a political ideology governing the social mores of our lives was stronger for many white people than any injunction of the state."

The movement to end the Vietnam War also served as training ground for most of the people included in this volume. Zinn flew to Hanoi in 1968 to receive the first U.S. prisoners of war released by the North Vietnamese government. Michael Albert, as a leader of Students for a Democratic Society, and Noam Chomsky, as a distinguished member of the faculty, worked together at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to oppose the war. Peter Kwong experienced the complex position of Asian Americans in the anti-war movement, keenly aware of the racism explicit in the broader U.S. culture's attitudes and actions toward the Vietnamese and often implicit in the anti-war movement's ideology as well. The interfaces of ethnicity and class politics drew Kwong and Marable into identity-based organizing, combined with continuing work with anti-war and socialist organizations. Ehrenreich likewise split her organizing, participating both in women's movement groups and anti-war groups. Urvashi Vaid, 11 years old and newly immigrated to the United States from India, participated in protests against the war, and a young Winona LaDuke forged her political consciousness watching the body count rise on television every night.

During the war, Chomsky and others were developing a radical understanding of the role of mass media in misrepresenting the reality of state and corporate power. In 1973, Chomsky published, with Edward Herman, a two-volume landmark study of U.S. imperialism, through a subsidiary of the major publishing conglomerate Warner Books. When Warner's owners were informed about the book's contents shortly before publication, its distribution was effectively killed; the subsidiary was eventually dissolved and the list sold to another subsidiary with no prior publishing program. This blatant political suppression played a key role in the development of a critique of corporate control of the media, called "the propaganda model" by Chomsky and Herman.

Winona LaDuke remembers 1973 as the year of the American Indian Movement occupation of Wounded Knee. It was also the birth year of the radical national newsweekly *Gay Community News*, where Vaid eventually joined debates on gay civil rights. With the end of the Vietnam War, energy from several different strands of the New Left had crystallized into the "new social movements" of the '70s. People of color and women—and white men who understood the importance of forces in addition to economics—worked to broaden socialist theory and practice to include gender and race considerations. Kwong concentrated on labor organizing in New York's Chinatown; Marable worked to bridge socialist and Black nationalist organizing; and Ehrenreich helped develop the socialist wing of the women's movement. LaDuke, an undergraduate at Harvard, undertook a research project exposing corporate and governmental toxic pollution of Native and Third World lands, leading her to join the struggle against development at Navajo.

Multi-issue socialist and radical groups shrank in the '70s, while the ranks of the new social movements swelled.

The limits of single-issue organizing and identity politics were hotly debated, both from within the movement and from without. Many activists organized in several autonomous movements, becoming personal bridges between diverse campaigns. Activists like LaDuke built links between the predominantly white, middle-class, nuclear power activists and Native Americans fighting uranium mining on Native lands, between the issues of nuclear power and nuclear weapons, between the obviously extreme threat of nuclear catastrophe and the more insidious and systemic corrosion of society by militarism and patriarchy. Vaid and hooks joined the ranks of women of color who were calling attention to the racist, elitist, and homophobic biases of feminism's exclusive focus on gender, as well as the sexism within their ethnic and racial traditions. The 1981 release of hooks' first book, *Ain't I a Woman*—by the new publishing house South End Press, co-founded by Michael Albert and others—was one of many signs that "second wave" feminism was being eclipsed by a third, multi-cultural, multi-class wave of women's radicalism.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 galvanized a broad swath of progressive forces to protest his war-mongering, attacks on the environment, and the rise of a racist, anti-feminist, anti-gay religious right. The anti-imperialism articulated in opposition to the U.S. war on Vietnam was again a central focus for the left during the '80s. Of the movements in solidarity with liberation forces in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and South Africa, Chomsky says, "These are completely unprecedented in the history of imperialism.... I don't think there has ever been a case in which thousands of people literally went to the countries under attack." On the domestic front, "Reaganomics" signified a radical transfer of wealth to the rich, the further impoverishment of women and

children, and the scapegoating of communities of color and gay men and lesbians. The AIDS epidemic destroyed all illusions of safety that gay men had created through 15 years of community-building, and contributed to a politicization among those gay men and lesbians who previously had not identified with other oppressed peoples. Their life-or-death passion and righteous indignation—expressed largely through ACT UP—resulted in some of the most effective activism in the post-Vietnam era.

There are a number of common themes running through these interviews: the process of politicization, the alienation of the self-conscious left from its potential participants and allies, and the tensions between New Left economism and the new social movements' emphasis on identity. The interviewees are unanimous in calling for a democratic left, free of elitism. Kwong cautions intellectuals "not to believe that we are the force behind change, or that we should do things for the people—we should work with the people." Likewise, several urge self-conscious radicals to stop dismissing popular culture, sports, and religion. While there is less agreement on the value of identity politics, all tend to recognize the necessity and value of autonomous, identity-based organizing and detailed attention to race and gender within class analyses and struggles.

The lessons of the last 30 years have led these movement leaders to see "revolution," and that ephemeral promised land of justice, less as an immediate aim and more as a gradual project. Ehrenreich calls it "marble rolling," the slow accumulation of cause and effect. "You've got to have a 50-year or 100-year plan," says LaDuke. When asked, "Where do we go from here?" Chomsky expresses the consensus of the interviewees: "Where is the place to organize? Just about anywhere."

These interviews, save for one, were conducted by the South End Press collective: Anthony Arnove, Loie Hayes, Lynn Lu, and Sonia Shah, during Fall 1997 and Winter 1998 through face-to-face, phone, and e-mail conversations. The interview with Urvashi Vaid was conducted by Alternative Radio's David Barsamian, and was broadcast internationally on his syndicated radio show in 1996. We would like to thank all the interviewees for their time and their activist work. We hope all our readers, from political newcomers to seasoned activists, will be challenged and inspired by the conversational tone, the personal perspectives, and the earnest desires expressed in these pages.



MICHAEL ALBERT

But What Are You For?

MICHAEL ALBERT was a founding member of Rosa Luxemburg Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at MIT in 1967, and through the '60s and '70s was a Boston-area and national student organizer; a local, regional, and national anti-war activist and organizer; and a community organizer. In subsequent years, he has participated in diverse organizing events, projects, and movements including anti-nuclear, anti-Gulf War, anti-apartheid, and other struggles.

Albert is author or co-author of a dozen books on political and social analysis, vision, and strategy, beginning with *What Is to Be Undone* (Porter Sargent, 1974) and including *Liberating Theory* (SEP, 1986), *Stop the Killing Train* (SEP, 1994), *Looking Forward: Participatory Economics for the Twenty-First Century* (SEP, 1991), and *Thinking Forward* (Arbeiter Ring, 1997). Albert is also a co-founder and a ten-year collective member of South End Press, a co-founder and five-year

faculty member of Z Media Institute, a co-founder and ten-year collective member of *Z Magazine*, the founder and a current faculty member of Learning on Line University (www.lolu.org), and the creator and system operator of *Z Magazine's* extensive website, ZNet (www.zmag.org). He is currently a staffperson and columnist for *Z Magazine*. A longer version of this interview is available on ZNet.



SOUTH END PRESS: What achievements of the left have given you the most hope for the future?

MICHAEL ALBERT: Ending feudalism, ending slavery, enacting labor laws, winning universal suffrage, ending Jim Crow laws, overcoming much of the mindset and practice of patriarchy as it was entrenched through the '50s and '60s, bringing gay rights and liberation into the light of social policy and practice, putting ecology on the political map. The left has a long lineage. I think most recently, however—during the time of my involvement, which is over the last 30 years and almost exclusively in the United States—we have had less than average structural impact, but way more than average ideological impact.

SEP: What do you mean?

MA: Well, we have affected ideas and behaviors, people's assumptions about life and themselves, very dramatically—perhaps as much or more than in any comparable historical period, I think. At the same time, we have had much less success changing institutions. The New Left, back at the beginning of that 30-year period I am addressing, misconceived its own power and even its purpose in some ways. It went for people's minds with great vigor, which was won-

derful, but it largely ignored trying to alter the institutional setting people operate in, which was very much a problem. And this has persisted in many ways since.

Also, there are lots of signs that the left's accomplishments around class and economics more generally have been less over the past 30 years than those regarding race, gender, political power, sexual preference, or age. There has been far less change in attitudes regarding class, I think. Our movements have dues structures that are often less progressive than U.S. tax codes. They have decision-making hierarchies and allocations of labor that are little different than those of General Motors, save for size. In society at large, markets are now celebrated voraciously, and the same is true, even after 30 years of struggle, in many parts of the left.

Some say class has suffered due to the distraction of paying so much attention to other phenomena such as race, gender, and sex. But this is nonsense. If the rise of a new focus causes the decline of those that preceded, why hasn't attention to race suffered due to concern with gender, or vice versa, or why haven't both suffered due to increased concerns with sexual preference? Class hasn't been addressed as well because the way the left understands and addresses class hasn't been adequate.

SEP: So what has compromised attention to class and economics? If you go back to the height of the '60s movements, there was huge interest in Marxism. Shouldn't that have led to growing class awareness, not less?

MA: Indeed, in many ways the emergence of race- and gender-focused movements was a reaction against the overwhelming Marxist-inspired preoccupation of late-'60s leftists with *only* class issues, or with other issues *only* as they related to class implications.

I actually spent a lot of my time in the '60s and '70s arguing against economism and on behalf of paying priority attention to issues of race, gender, and power, as well as economics. A number of books I wrote back then, both alone and with Robin Hahnel, were in large part about this. Robin and I were often attacked as being anti-class and anti-Marxist, in fact. But it seems to me that the problem was that there was never a good class consciousness and class allegiance in the left, or at least in large parts of the left. Marxism wasn't a source and foundation from which powerful and truly liberatory class consciousness and class focus emerged. Rather, there was a very mixed bag of attitudes about class, from the beginning.

Virtually everyone on the left is critical of the ruling capitalist class and says they want the power and stature of the working class to increase. That's good, as a start, but what about lawyers and doctors and engineers and high-level academics and plant managers? What about people who have a virtual monopoly on decision-making levers in the economy, who do largely intellectual work, who largely control their own conditions of work and also define or control the conditions that other more typical workers endure? As I see it, about 20 percent or so of our population is neither capital nor labor but part of what Robin and I called the "coordinator class," monopolizing levers of economic power and associated skills and knowledge, etc.

Working people in the United States consider this class the hated and arrogant enemy, and, sadly and ironically, at the same time, want their sons and daughters to join the coordinator class, to become doctors, lawyers, etc. Yet the coordinator class is largely absent from the conceptual framework of most leftists. This is pretty amazing.

While conceptually largely ignoring its existence, the left, I believe, is often far more identified with and oriented toward the life views, values, and aims of the coordinator class than it is toward working people. Indeed, I think Marxism is, in the end, the ideology of this intellectual/administrative class, not of working people *per se*. And Leninism is the strategy of this class, aimed to elevate them to ruling economic status, against capital but also against labor.

In the '60s, there were many young people who identified by background, habits, and aspiration with the coordinator class who were working in and especially leading anti-capitalist, Marxist movements. Being as moral and committed to justice on many counts as most of these folks were, we were generally unable to overtly admit this class conundrum, even to ourselves, I believe. And therein lie the seeds of a real mess.

Perhaps there is a sense in which it was precisely the emergence of race and gender insights that forced the decline of attention to class. Had there been movements in which class remained a critical focus, which were highly entwined with the developing women's and anti-racist movements, they would have been inexorably pushed to deal with issues of coordinator-class values and agendas, as against working-class values and agendas—because the race-focused and gender-focused agendas paid such close attention to personal politics.

Women and Blacks in the '60s and '70s movements took the lead in forcing attention to the ideological and institutional aspects of racism and sexism in society *and also* in the movement, but many movements have been quite content not to incorporate working people, and certainly not to incorporate them in leadership positions.

I think our movements have a lot of work to do in discovering what a liberated viewpoint is around class and in bringing it into our lives and projects. And until this happens, as it has been happening regarding race and gender over the past few decades, however fitfully at times, we're going to continue to have movements that accomplish less around class, that attract few working people, or that even have oppressive class aims.

SEP: Along with the problem of class, you've talked about the left's problem with negativism. Can you talk about that?

MA: For 30 years we have done consciousness-raising around how bad things are, around the broad and powerful systemic causes of the ills that people suffer—racism, poverty, what have you. And we have been quite successful in all this, it seems to me. But where was the consciousness-raising about what we want, about goals, about means of accomplishing change, about our prospects for victory? Lacking insight into future possibilities, a continually growing awareness of the scale of oppressions and their tenacity breeds cynicism, not resistance. I think that is largely our plight. Of course, it doesn't mean we should stop pointing out the systemic causes of oppression, stop naming the enemy, so to speak. But it does suggest that we have to give a lot more attention, at the same time, to vision and strategy, and to creating organizational forms that can protect people against depression and nurture opposition.

I remember in the early New Left period there was this very influential speech that Carl Oglesby gave. In it, pretty much for the first time in a really large activist venue, he railed at liberals and named imperialism as the real culprit in Vietnam. This kind of systemic "revelation" (and others

about gender and race and poverty and so on) was very powerful then, because it was so new and eye-opening for almost everyone. Now, 30 years later, revelations from the left about how bad the society's institutions are rarely go beyond what people already take for granted. Our negative/critical messages don't generate anger and action, but only pile up more evidence that the enemy is beyond reach. What we need are desire, hope, and vision. But what almost everyone spends their time on is enumerating ills.

SEP: Why?

MA: I honestly don't know. I have asked this question myself to many people.

Maybe it's easier. Maybe it's habit, or maybe everyone is emulating a few people who do this very well, rather than moving on to other tasks, so there becomes an imbalance. Maybe the utterly inane blatherings of some postmodernists against vision and even against thinking and rationality have had some effect...wait, let me be a little less obnoxious about that. Maybe some people's perfectly justified worries about sectarianism and authoritarianism have confused them into thinking that one should avoid vision and strategy.

Another '60s notable, Tom Hayden—who is far smarter and more insightful than his compromised career leads some folks to believe—likes to say that the left has a penchant for grasping defeat from the jaws of victory. I think he has in mind two related things. First, that we are often so caught up in our analyses of how horrible everything is that we don't see that there are good things out there, too. For some leftists, it is as if celebrating progress or even admitting progress somehow falsifies our purpose. What a crazy, debilitating notion. What would be the point of struggle if progress was impossible?

Second, when the left wins something, such as an end to a war or affirmative action or higher wages, or whatever else, the gain is, of course, enacted by the powers that be. They sign the bill or end the war or whatever, and then they take credit for it and denigrate the left as having been just an annoying obstacle to reaching these ends. What Hayden was pointing out is that the left all too often accepts this manipulative spin and views its own success like some horrible defeat, a crass cooptation.

SEP: But surely cooptation and compromises do occur, and we should be critical of that.

MA: Of course they occur. And of course we should watch out for it. But we act as though winning a big battle is a loss if the bad guys get on TV and say that they made the change "despite us," which is, of course, what they will always do. We go along with their spin instead of understanding and explaining the truth of our achievements.

How do we know what is a victory and what isn't? I am a revolutionary. I do not think society is basically okay and we have to just deal with some problems here and there. I want to transform society's basic institutions—its polity, culture, kinship relations, and economy. So, for me, there are two central criteria to use in thinking about battles we can wage and their outcomes.

First, people's lives, preferably those worst off, should be improved. It won't do to say that everyone will be better after the revolution. People need better conditions now, on moral grounds, and also to have any faith in future prospects. Second, it is also important that gains lead forward rather than in a circle. Struggle really is struggle. The other side wants to give as little as possible and they will take back anything they have had to give in the past, given the oppor-

tunity. So gains must be won and then also defended and preferably enlarged. And if we are to really transcend the ills of the past, gains have to empower disempowered constituencies and lead to ever greater movements seeking further change, and ultimately real transformations.

A very bright fellow, again from the '60s, a French writer named André Gorz, first enunciated the idea that what we had to repeatedly win were "non-reformist reforms." Non-reformist reforms, he said, are gains in the way people live, in laws, in structures, in consciousness, in our own organization, which improve people's lives but also create a new platform from which to fight for still further improvements. These type of reforms are not ends in themselves—you win and then you go home and that's it—but are part of a continuing process. So that's what I look for as a sign that a project or movement or campaign has been really worthwhile: improvements in people's lives and new infrastructure, and new consciousness or organizational conditions that are conducive to still further advances.

SEP: If the left lacks a unified vision, is the problem that we don't know what we want, or that we can't agree on it?

MA: I think it's that we have given very little thought to what we want and had very little serious debate about it. Most people on the left can't answer the question, "What are you for?" beyond very vague and unconvincing generalities. This is so, I think, regarding culture, gender, race, politics, or government, and regarding economics, for sure. I actually think that if there were some clear and compelling vision widely advocated, there would be a whole lot of agreement on it—and, of course, some disagreement or doubt, too. That's what consciousness-raising and organizing are about.

The biggest source of real difference will be differences in interest. Whites and men have to be taught by people in minority communities and by women what is best for those domains and have to transcend the narrow messages of their prior experiences and circumstances. And the same holds for the elitist intellectual and managerial pretensions of many leftists, which will need to be educated away by working people. But I think all this can be addressed, as can what we need for healthy and liberating sexual and educational and cultural interactions, as well.

SEP: What differences do you see in the way the next generation is taking up the mantle?

MA: This is a hard question. One doesn't want to have negative impact, to be a naysayer, and especially to criticize what we don't understand. Sometimes it is good to get out of the way. But, you know, my concern with young folks today isn't that they are jettisoning things I believed in 30 years ago, and particularly ways we defined ourselves and acted. My concern, instead, is that while they feel they are learning from our mistakes and creating something very different, all too often, in critical if subtle aspects, I think they are instead repeating our mistakes.

SEP: Can you give some examples?

MA: We moved left and saw everyone else who was lagging behind as manipulated, or ignorant, or sucked into consumption, and so on. So do today's youth. We became disdainful of many facets of U.S. daily life—sports, TV, movies, the way people dress, what they eat. So have today's youth. We lost track of why apolitical people do the things they do, of the courage and insight that they actually have, and so have today's youth. It is troubling, but certainly not

young people's fault, I think. Rather, my generation hasn't done a good job of being truly self-critical and dredging up really revealing lessons from our actions, rather than just obvious ones.

SEP: Can you describe your work on economic vision?

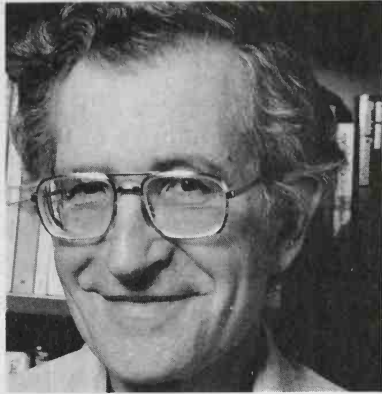
MA: Along with my co-author and friend Robin Hahnel, I have spent a lot of time working on an economic vision that we call "participatory economics." It intends to accomplish what economic leftists have always claimed to be for—delivering power over economic decisions to those affected by them—but haven't ever achieved in practice.

It rejects markets as antithetical to justice and self-management, among other failings, and it rejects the "old models," including social democracy, what goes by the name "market socialism," and "centrally planned socialism," which are actually economies that elevate managers and planners and intellectual workers more generally to ruling status. Participatory economics emphasizes remuneration according to effort and sacrifice, not power or property or even contribution to the social product (which is favored by many other progressives).

It argues that economic actors should not only have just incomes, but also just circumstances, and that economic life should not divide people into those who are more empowered by the roles they fill (and who run the economy) and those who are less empowered by the roles they fill (and follow other people's orders, having little or no say of their own). It favors balanced job complexes, or people having jobs composed of a mix of responsibilities and tasks unique to them but on average similar in their quality of life and empowerment effects to what others in the economy have.

It favors council democracy, an idea with a long heritage, and also what we call participatory planning, for allocation. We have written about this vision in a number of books and articles, and there have been some discussions of it in print as well in various periodicals, as well as experiments with practical implementations of at least part of the vision, for example at South End Press and Arbeiter Ring Press, and other sites as well. There is a lot regarding participatory economics in the forums on ZNet, as well.

I have to say, I look over the last 30 years, and I see a deep wellspring of humane and equitable aspirations continually pushing people, from within their own lives, toward anger at oppression and even toward desire for some new stance and way forward—call it leftism. But I also see a left that, because of its resource limitations, not only doesn't find these people and can't communicate with them, but when it does find them, by its character limitations, often actually pushes them away. We have to do something about this.



NOAM CHOMSKY

There Are No Limits to What Can Be Done

NOAM CHOMSKY is a linguist, scholar, and political analyst. Born on December 7, 1928, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Chomsky became politically conscious at a young age, writing his first political article, on the fight against fascism in Spain, when he was ten years old. Chomsky has written and lectured extensively on linguistics, philosophy, international affairs, U.S. foreign policy, and other contemporary political issues. Chomsky's groundbreaking work on Palestine and the Middle East, East Timor, the Gulf War, and the mass media have gained international attention. He has published 12 books with South End Press, including *The Culture of Terrorism*, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, and, most recently, *Powers and Prospects: Reflections on Human Nature and the Social Order*.

SOUTH END PRESS: What do you think are the most significant achievements and failures of the left over the last 20 years?

NOAM CHOMSKY: You mean achievements of popular movements. Well, one quite remarkable achievement was the solidarity movements of the '80s. These are completely unprecedented in the history of imperialism, to my knowledge. They were far more extensive than the protests of the '60s and also much more deeply rooted in the mainstream of American society. They were centered in midwestern churches and that sort of thing, quite mainstream. And, in fact, they went very far.

I don't think there has ever been a case in which thousands of people literally went to the countries under attack. Many of them even decided to live in villages, in the hope that a white face might restrict state terrorism, which was, of course, extraordinary. Networks of communication were established so that millions of people knew lots of things about what was going on, which were kept out of the mainstream information systems. And, in fact, although it didn't prevent hundreds of thousands of people from being slaughtered, it certainly prevented much worse things from happening. This was not just Central America, but also South Africa, and other countries. These were really significant achievements. They are not discussed very much. That is because they were not elite, they were not supposed to be happening. But they did.

Over the last 25 years, the major popular movements that have had significant impact on the general society and have changed it, that have had a major civilizing effect—the feminist movement, the environmental movement, and so on—

these are mostly developments of the '70s and '80s. Their roots might be in the activism of the '60s, but the movements themselves developed and extended later. The same is true of the changes in respect for other cultures, rights of oppressed people, and so on. These are quite significant changes. If you compare the United States now to what it was, say, 35 years ago, the changes are quite dramatic. These are changes in popular consciousness that are quite deeply embedded.

One of many indications of it is the first recognition in hundreds of years of our history—the first recognition of what happened to the indigenous population. As recently as the '60s, this topic was denied. You can read, in standard texts of diplomatic history around 1970, written by quite liberal authors, incidentally, that after the American Revolution, the colonists turned to their next task, which was “felling trees and Indians,” and extending to their “natural boundaries.” Nobody batted an eyelash over that. There were textbooks—I know because my children were using them in a professional, progressive, upper-middle-class town—that reported, fairly accurately, the slaughters of Indians, like the Pequot massacre, and praised them. The extent of the terror had been suppressed and denied. All of this broke into public attention in the '70s, initially from outside the professions, but finally within them as well. Well, you know, it doesn't help the victims much, but at least it is a recognition of the original sin of U.S. society.

On the other hand, there have been major setbacks. The activism of the '60s inspired really serious fear among elites. Large sectors of the population that were supposed to remain in apathy and passivity actually became engaged and tried to enter the public arena and press for their own demands. That's what's called a “crisis of democracy” among

liberal elites.

A major effort has been going on to overcome this "crisis" by insuring that the institutions responsible for "the indoctrination of the young"—I'm quoting—like the schools, the universities, and churches, return to discipline. And that the media not be permitted the marginal independence that some began to show in the late '60s, and that they return to orthodoxy.

Much of this is connected with the decisions by powerful states, primarily the United States and Britain, back in the '70s, to undermine the post-war economic system, which was based, crucially, on restriction of financial capital. It has been well understood for at least 50 years, in fact long beyond, that the free flow of capital offers a very powerful weapon against any form of functioning democracy and social reform. So, for example, if a country tries to stimulate its economy, or to introduce measures to help deprived people, capital can flow right out. And the scale of it now is so enormous that Third World countries are devastated, and even rich countries like the United States are under the control of what some international economists call the "virtual senate," meaning a community of investors and powerful corporations who can essentially control public policy.

SEP: Why do you think progressives were able to break through these barriers during the solidarity movements, but are less able to now?

NC: Well, there are different issues. It is one thing to try to block terrorist attacks against *campesinos* in Central America. It is something quite different to attack the central institutions of state capitalist society: the private financial and industrial institutions, which are in effect private tyrannies, and which by law are unaccountable to the public. When you try to consider those, you are really facing the absolute foun-

dations of power. State terrorism in Central America is a peripheral part of domestic power.

SEP: How should the left organize in this kind of climate?

NC: Well, in the traditional fashion, but it has to face new issues. To be concrete, take the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), which has been under intense negotiations in secret by the rich countries, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), since May 1995. It is scheduled to be signed, they hope in secret, in April 1998. It has been a remarkable tribute to the American "free press" that they have been able to maintain near total secrecy on this for three years. Of course, the business world knows all about it, the media leaders know all about it, and so on; they are heavily involved. But it hasn't broken through in the United States, except through the efforts of some activist groups. Even Congress claims not to know about it, and probably most members of Congress don't.

The reason it has been kept secret is an awareness that the public isn't going to like it one bit when they hear about it and in fact, will be outraged. One issue that activists ought to become involved in, and many are, in Canada even more so, is exposing this.

Just to add a critical word about the activists, whom I support. The MAI is condemned, rightly, as granting too many rights to corporations. That's true. But that presupposes that corporations should have any rights at all. Why should that be true? A century ago, conservatives in the United States—that's a breed that no longer exists, but they did exist then—bitterly attacked the corporatization of America. They attacked it because it was, and was intended to be, a major attack on markets and because it attacks the fundamental roots of natural rights doctrine, the rights of

persons. It granted these collectivist institutions the rights of persons, which include those in the Bill of Rights—freedom of advertising, freedom from search and seizure, and so on. Conservative opinion called it a form of communism. They were not wrong, really. The corporatization that took place in the United States and other industrial countries had similar intellectual roots to those that led to bolshevism and fascism.

Why should we accept the transfer of decision-making power to huge, unaccountable, private tyrannies that both dominate the state and rely on it extensively—for socialization of cost and risk, for massive subsidies, for industrial policies that make the public pay for innovation and industrial development—and then transfer the rights to it to private hands, as is happening right now, for example, with the Internet?

SEP: You've talked about the '70s and '80s. How about in the last ten years, the late '80s and the '90s?

NC: It is a complicated time. For one thing, this has been a period in which a substantial part of the population has been under rather serious attack. Of course, poverty in the United States is not the same as poverty in Central Africa. Nevertheless, for the majority of the population, probably about two-thirds, wages have either stagnated or declined. Contrary to what is claimed, this is not a period of significant economic growth. In fact, this is the slowest recovery from recession in U.S. post-war history, and U.S. growth per capita is around the average for the rich countries. There is a lot of falsification around this. A very small percentage of the population has become extremely wealthy. Most of the population is either stagnating or declining.

Public opinion studies show rather interestingly that people have just diminished their expectations. If they can

somehow get by, that is about all they hope for. In conditions like that, say, a family where two people are devoting their lives to trying to put food on the table, with the worst wages in the industrial world, the worst working conditions, longer hours, and so on, they don't have time for much else. In addition to which, they are being bombarded by an enormous propaganda system, which is dedicated mostly to getting them out of the way, diverting them to something else, which isn't too hard, actually, if you've been devoting your day to keeping your family alive. That's undermined the potential for activism among large parts of the population.

Among elites, the same conditions have to some extent led to that result. If you are going to an elite university, say, you can quite readily join the small sector that is benefiting enormously, in material terms at least, from the state policies designed to impose a kind of Third World structure on the United States. That is a temptation. And it has doubtless undermined the potential for activism in the leading universities and many of the places that were centers of activism in the '60s.

The labor movement has simply been intimidated. You can learn that from Alan Greenspan or the Clinton administration, both of which have been very proud of the fact that workers have been intimidated—what Greenspan calls “worker insecurity,” a major contribution to the “health of the economy.” Workers are not pressing for wage gains. That is supposed to be good for the economy by some ideological measure. And they tell you, very straight, that this is a great achievement. There have been fewer pressures from working people to have a share of the limited economic growth that has taken place. That lowers inflation, increases profits, does all sorts of wonderful things for rich people. And it is true—people are intimidated by the conditions that are being imposed on them by state corporate power.

Take for example the 1991-95 Caterpillar strike, which was a real blow to the labor movement. Caterpillar won flat out. They were able to do it by using what they call replacement workers. (The United States has already been censured for that by the international labor organizations. It is probably the only industrial country that allows it.)

And by transferring production abroad. Caterpillar has been able to use the huge profits that it has gained along with other corporations in the last few years to construct excess capacity abroad. Since the labor movement is not really internationalized, it can't cooperate very effectively internationally. Caterpillar was able to use those facilities to undermine the domestic working class.

Plus, workers in Caterpillar and Staley (who were locked out in Decatur, Illinois, from 1993-95) and other industries subjected to this have a very hard time reaching the public. They don't have the facilities, they don't have the resources, and the activist groups aren't really strong enough to mobilize people. We saw that right here in Boston when Staley workers came to try to gain some support. There was a very sad turnout, I must say. Those are things that restrict possibilities for activism.

But, of course, they don't terminate it. Things have been much worse before. For example, in the '20s, the situation was far worse. It looked as if the labor movement was dead. Well, a couple of years later, the country was blowing up, workers were on the verge of taking over factories, and there's no reason it can't happen again. It has happened repeatedly throughout history.

Furthermore, if you look over time, there is sort of an upward cycle. Despite regression, things are better than they were. For example, right now there is a struggle, as there should be, to try to protect the minimal health care that is available to large parts of the public. In the '50s, there was no

such struggle because there was no Medicare. Another major struggle that is coming along is to protect Social Security. It is important, limited though it is. But, until the '30s, there was no struggle to defend Social Security because it didn't exist. These things were introduced as a result of extensive popular activism. So, the next phases of activism can start from a higher plane than before.

SEP: What are some promising areas in which you see alternative institutions being created?

NC: That runs across the board. From the media, to community- and worker-controlled enterprises, to support for the people who are suffering from the attack on health care and what is called welfare reform, which is the destruction of support systems for poor women and children.

In every one of those areas, alternative institutions can be constructed for self-help and popular organization and communication and pressure, and also to enter the political arena to change these tendencies, using whatever means are available within the parliamentary institutions—and there are means—and then on to trying to get to the cancer itself, not to its symptoms.

SEP: Do you see any differences in the way the next generation is taking up progressive causes?

NC: "Generations" is a media term. There are always activists, organizers, lots of people concerned about the issues, probably an overwhelming majority of the population. They try to deal with things depending on their personal circumstances, the level of organization, and so on. You can't describe these things in generational terms. They are always going on, in a complicated way, which varies all over the place. There are times of significant change, like the change

from the '20s to the '30s was dramatic. The change from the '50s to the '60s was dramatic. The rise of the major movements of the '70s and '90s was dramatic. But things are always happening.

SEP: How did you become politicized?

NC: That goes back to when I was four years old, and seeing people coming to the door trying to sell rags so they could have enough food to eat. Or when I was traveling on the trolley car with my mother, and watched, passing by, a textile factory where police working for the managers were beating up women workers outside. Watching my unemployed relatives, who were mostly working class. It is just what I grew up with.

SEP: Elsewhere in this book, some people talk about how there are elements of the left that are hostile to the working class, even though on the surface people always say that leftists are trying to further the interests of working people. What do you think about that?

NC: I am not too happy about terms like "the left," to be honest. And I don't use it much. Take the solidarity movements of the '80s. Were they on the left? I mean, a lot of them were fundamentalist Christians, including leading elements. I was really close to them, and tried to work with them and cooperate with them as much as I could, but we disagreed on many things. Or liberation theology, which had a really dramatic impact until it was crushed, in part just by murder, in part by other means. Is that left or right? Those terms don't mean much.

But there are elements of what is called the left which are hostile to the labor movement and to mass movements in general. Undoubtedly that is true. Why they should be called

the left I don't know. That is for other people to decide. If by "the left" you mean people who are committed to peace and justice and freedom and so on, there can't be elements of the left opposed to the workers' movement, at least under that definition.

SEP: Michael Moore leveled this criticism against readers of *The Nation*. Perhaps "liberal intellectuals" is a more accurate term.

NC: Well, he didn't name names, so it is hard to discuss. But you can name names. Take for example, Anthony Lewis, is he a liberal intellectual? Well, I assume so. In fact, he is supposed to be the prototype. When the corporations, including the media, were trying to ram through the North American Free Trade Agreement over public opposition, they flatly refused to allow the actual position of the labor movement to be expressed. It existed, but they wouldn't let it be publicized. And Anthony Lewis was writing articles denouncing the "backward, unenlightened" labor movement and their "crude threatening tactics" and so forth. Okay, I assume that he is a liberal intellectual. Maybe that is what Michael Moore had in mind. Lewis probably reads *The Nation*.

These people perform a very useful service, by demarcating the limits of criticism—"You can go as far as me, and no further, and look how left-wing I am." That is a very important function in a propaganda system, which is why they are protected. People like Anthony Lewis get extraordinary protection from *The New York Times*. He is, for example, allowed to lie outright and slander their political enemies, who are never even permitted a few words of response in a letter. I can testify to that.

SEP: How do you feel about your own role as an inspiration for so many progressives and activists?

NC: Almost everything I do is in response to activist requests. I try to do what I can. When the Staley workers came to Boston, I was asked to talk to try to help publicize it. Of course, I'm glad to do that. In fact, that is almost everything I do. If you look at the things I write—articles for *Z Magazine*, or books for South End Press, or whatever—they are mostly based on talks and meetings and that kind of thing.

But I'm kind of like a parasite. I mean, I'm living off the activism of others. I'm happy to do it. If I can help out, fine. But the people who are doing the work are somewhere else. They are the ones who are organizing the meetings and carrying out the activities. If anybody is an inspiration, it ought to be them.

SEP: What progressive goals do you think are possible to achieve in the near future?

NC: Well, I think right now it is very important to hold the line, to prevent further attacks on poor people and working people, and to protect minimal rights like the right to health care, or to feed your children, and so on. And to block further attacks on democracy and freedom, like the so-called free trade agreements, which actually have very little to do with free trade, but are major efforts to shift decision-making power into corporate hands, to private tyrannies and the states connected with them. The major immediate task is to face all of those problems.

And then, that is just a step toward moving as far as you can toward the heart of the matter, which is the existence of illegitimate institutions. And there are no limits to what can be done.

There are big efforts to make people feel helpless, as if there is some kind of mysterious economic law that forces things to happen in a particular way, like the law of gravita-

tion or whatever. That is just nonsense. These are all human institutions, they are subject to human will, and they can be eliminated like other tyrannical institutions have been.

SEP: Do you see issues on which progressives can find common ground with people who haven't aligned themselves with what we call progressive issues?

NC: Every one I mentioned. If you look at public opinion polls, you find quite interesting facts. The polls show that the public is against "welfare," but the same polls show that the public is in favor of helping people in need, like poor women and children. Well, then why are they opposed to welfare, which is helping poor people in need? Because the propaganda system has created a concept of welfare which brings to people's mind rich women, by implication Black, driving Cadillacs on the way to pick up checks at a government office and taking away their hard-earned money. Yeah, okay, if that is what welfare is, I'm against it, too.

Most of the population has basically social democratic attitudes, even though they have no public support. If they had any articulate support, they would go far beyond that. I've discovered over and over again, talking to groups that are supposed to be conservative, working-class Reagan Democrats and so on, that within five minutes, it turns out they are all in favor of getting rid of bosses and managers and taking over the factories. Because it is an obvious thing to do. So where is the place to organize? Just about anywhere.



BARBARA EHRENREICH

On Political Ecstasy and Marble Rolling

BARBARA EHRENREICH is a longtime feminist and democratic socialist and the author of nine books, most recently, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*. Based in Florida, she has been an essayist for *Time* since 1990. Her book, *The Worst Years of Our Lives*, was described by *The New York Times* as “elegant, trenchant, savagely angry, morally outraged and outrageously funny.” Another volume, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, was nominated for a National Book Critics Award. Her essays, reviews, and humor have appeared in numerous publications, including *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Washington Post Magazine*, and *Harper’s*. Ehrenreich shared the National Magazine Award for Excellence in Reporting in 1980 and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for 1987-88.

SOUTH END PRESS: In November 1996, you wrote that "the death blow" to the left fell in 1992 because the progressive leadership had been seduced by "access" to the Clinton White House. Since then, many progressives have given up on politicizing the administration, and there have been a few signs of life in the left, for example, the rejuvenated labor movement and the 1997 UPS strike. Do you think the left has revived?

BARBARA EHRENREICH: I think the love affair with Clinton is finally over, but we lost a lot of time, from 1992 and 1996, when people on the left were cutting him a lot of slack, and lots of people muted their criticisms or their activism. Now, is there a comeback? I don't know.

I am not totally overwhelmed with enthusiasm about the labor movement. I think it was tragic that the AFL-CIO put \$30 million into Democratic candidates in 1996—which is \$30 million that is not available for organizing.

The scandals within the supposedly reformed Teamsters union are pretty tragic, too. There are a lot of people saying, "Well, there is always some kind of crooked stuff in financing elections." But a union is supposed to be a little bit more moral, or at least a reformed union is, than the Democratic Party. It was particularly painful to see that the Teamsters were about to run out of strike benefits during the UPS strike. What would have happened if that strike had gone on for another week? It looks like, meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of dollars had been siphoned out of the union treasury into the Ron Carey re-election campaign. That's truly depressing.

SEP: What are some of the problems in the left? Not just organizing problems, but theoretical problems. You wrote in

1995 that leftists should abandon what you called "deluded populism" and the idea of "historical inevitability."

BE: We have to be used to being a minority—a small minority—for some time to come. The odd thing is that the right, even when it is in power, likes to think of itself as an embattled minority against this elite that somehow runs everything. Whereas the left, even when it has no power at all, likes to imagine it somehow represents the majority of people. These are mirror-image delusions.

It is important to stick to principles, even when some of them may be unpopular now for one reason or another. For example, there has been a tendency for some progressives to look at the power of the right, and say, "Well, all we can focus on is economic justice issues, because other things, whether they are abortion rights or drug law reform, will be less popular and more divisive." And I think that is the wrong approach. There are certain core things that we stand for, and these include both economic justice and civil liberties, which you can't back away from.

SEP: How did you become political, and how has your perspective changed over time?

BE: I was radicalized in the '60s by the anti-war movement, which I was a participant in. The Civil Rights movement was going on, too. We were radicals—that's what we called ourselves. It wasn't a very ideological or intellectual movement, but it was very insistent on both economic justice and personal freedom. I was also very involved in the women's movement, from 1969-70 on. I joined the New American Movement in 1973 or so, which then later merged with the Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee to form Democratic Socialists of America, which I've been a member of ever since it started in 1983. That's my boring organizational life.

SEP: Boring?

BE: It doesn't sound very exciting when you just put it in terms of organizations. It leaves out all the drama and angst.

SEP: Tell me about the drama and angst, then!

BE: Oh, no! [Laughs.] It is just that every one of these organizational involvements has been fraught at various times with responsibilities and tensions and factional infighting and difficult decisions.

SEP: Getting back to what you said before about getting used to being a minority: if we are an unpopular minority, yet we're supposedly trying to uplift everyone, isn't there a contradiction somewhere?

BE: A lot of things on the progressive side are very popular and mainstream, like national health insurance and a fairer break for working people. We're not kooks, with ideas that nobody can understand.

But some ideas that are part of a radical program have not been so popular in recent years, such as the need for a real safety net, including welfare or some equivalent of it. That has been fought to the death by the right. Also, I'd like to see big reforms in the criminal justice system. That is not a popular idea right now. Sentences are way too long in this country. Prison conditions border on torture in many cases. And if we want to cut down on crime, we should end the war on drugs. These are not popular, mainstream ideas; they're not based on polls and focus groups.

The burden is on us to make the argument that these things would actually improve particular lives, as well as everybody's lives in aggregate. You have to make that effort. You don't just drop things because they are unpopular ideas at the moment.

SEP: You talk a lot about the human need for communal, transcendent experience, which is one of the guiding points in your book, *Blood Rites*. It points to a current fissure among progressives, between those who were politicized by tearing down what were seen as oppressive community institutions—like the church or marriage—and the new “communitarians,” who call for more family, more connection, more community. How do you characterize this need for transcendent, communal experience?

BE: That desire for solidarity, to be bonded with other people, can take either left or right forms. In this century, fascists were often best at orchestrating it, with Hitler’s rallies and things like that. The ‘60s was a time when it was more the property of the left, that kind of transforming excitement of being involved with large numbers of people in some cause.

I’m talking about something different than the communitarians. Community is another notion. It is a stable, almost static notion—I think of a small town. I’m talking about a kind of experience that can unite people who don’t even know each other, and that can occur in crowds and demonstrations.

What I’m trying to figure out is, where did that moment of passion—of public ecstasy, to perhaps overstate it—go in our society? Not to say that there is some definite need that has to be expressed in one place or another, because I’m not sure there is.

But it is interesting that since the waning of the movements of the ‘60s, for one thing, sports have become more and more a pervasive part of our lives. Sports, among other things, clearly represents a place where at least some small version of excitement and solidarity is permissible. In the rest of your life, you may be completely isolated from other people. But when you go cheer on the Florida Marlins, you can suddenly be uplifted into this collective euphoria.

The other thing that has happened since the movements of the '60s is that religious worship has become more emotionally expressive. The mainstream denominations continue to be in decline compared to those that feature a lot of emotion. Some of the mainstream denominations have been picking up on that, and adding guitars and hugs to their services. These are sort of apolitical forms of what we could call collective ecstasy.

In politics, no matter how good the issues are or how appropriate the "objective conditions" are—to use a Marxist term—you don't really get a movement that changes things in a big way unless it is fired by some of this passion, unless people are meeting some of their needs for human solidarity from it. This can range from finding friends in the movement all the way to the thrilling, uplifting experience of being in giant rallies and demonstrations and feeling you are part of a really vast groundswell.

SEP: Is this capacity for collective euphoria something that organizers should consciously exploit?

BE: Good organizers do. People want concrete things, like more money and better benefits and so forth, which draw them into the labor movement or the progressive movement, but nothing really takes off until they are fired up in some way by a different kind of vision—by the excitement, often for the first times in their lives, of being recognized as an individual by a group of other people they like and respect, all the way to the thrill of chanting and picketing. Well, picketing can get pretty boring. But a good organizer realizes that there are emotional dimensions that go beyond the rational interests that everybody brings to a movement.

SEP: What role do reasoned arguments like your own

have to play in inducing these passions for change?

BE: I'm not saying that they are not important! Nobody takes all the risks of joining a union organizing drive just to experience the thrills they could get at a baseball game. If you don't want the risk—and with it, the possibility of real achievements—you can go to the game. You don't get anything out of it, either; it is just the sheer excitement of the crowd without any content.... Well, maybe I say that because I'm not a baseball fan.... People are moved by the rational calculus of what they will gain by participating. But they probably will not change their lives a lot unless these emotional needs are met, too.

SEP: Some leftists have said that *Blood Rites* smacked of biological determinism. Also, what do you think of the critique, such as that in Alan Sokal's spoof in *Social Text*, that parts of the left are anti-science?

BE: When I was working on *Blood Rites*, which includes a new evolutionary perspective on human violence, I remember several times burling about my ideas with political friends and being shocked when they would sometimes make the sign of the cross at me and say, "Oh, no, you can't say that. You can't think that. You can't trace things back to prehistory because that's 'deterministic.'" I was really shaken by the dogmatism of that response. Dogmatism doesn't belong on the left. If we can look at things historically, why not prehistorically, too? The difference is pretty arbitrary, as far as I'm concerned.

SEP: That was the main sticking point, that you crossed some kind of time line?

BE: Yes, and that in so doing, you are asserting that certain habits or patterns of thought or activity could persist

over many generations. In fact, what I try to do in the book is not to say that these behaviors or ideas are permanent and immutable, but to try to find where they started, so we can understand better what they're all about.

The negative response comes from something that I share—a horror of the misapplications of biology to justify social hierarchy, especially of gender and race. There is a history of that. But it goes a little too far when it means you can't invoke biological explanations for anything at all.

SEP: How do you think the left suffers for that?

BE: It is not how the left suffers, but how many debates in society suffer. People on the left often don't even join these discussions. Right now, we are still in this gene-for-everything mode, at least in the media. It is determinist to the point of being absolutely silly—genes for violence, genes for adventurism, and so on.

I would like to see more people critically engaging that. And they don't have to be scientists to do so. But you're not even in the discussion if you are saying that anything about genes and human behavior is automatically out of order.

SEP: You wrote in May 1994 that the divisions of race and ideology were "archaic" and "the real divisions are between those who watch MTV and those who favor Christian broadcasting." You were being facetious, but do you think there is any truth to the idea that politics has been reduced to lifestyle issues, and how do you think this affects organizing today, especially of youth? For example, the whole post-feminism scenario, in which being a feminist today is wearing the right kind of shoes, or reading a certain kind of 'zine—which is pretty different from talking about patriarchy and women in general.

BE: I think that has always been true. In the '70s, there was a very individualistic, lifestyle interpretation of feminism—that all you need to be a feminist is a bunch of credit cards in your own name, for example. That's always been there. This kind of individualistic interpretation never applies to socialism, though. It is very hard to be a lone socialist.

SEP: Well, you wear cheap clothes, you know. You lend things to other people.

BE: I didn't know that was a political choice! [Laughs.] That's just being a mensch.

What tends to be missing for the next generation is the sense of collective struggle. For a lot of women in my generation, feminism is where we first discovered the collective excitement of a social movement. For me, it happened more in the anti-war movement, and feminism was more about finding that other women were great! You lived in a society that looked down on women, and you didn't want to be around them, because they were second-class citizens. You couldn't identify with them. So, it was an amazing discovery that we were actually fun to be with.

I don't see that this generation is likely to have that experience. Things seem a little more individualistic, less likely to be group-oriented. That might not be so bad in some ways. I think we spent much too much time in meetings, and probably sapped our political energies in many cases. But I always feel nervous making any generational comparisons.

SEP: What do you think are some of the most important areas for activists to focus on within existing political institutions? You mentioned providing a safety net, for instance.

BE: Yeah, except we can't get anywhere with that, given the political makeup of the Congress and the presidency.

We have to get over the idea that just carrying around in our pockets a list of good progressive reforms that the government should undertake is all we need to do. Universal health care, child care, blah, blah, blah. We are a long way from having a government that will enact those things. We have to aim for things that are more achievable in a time when we are completely frozen out of power.

One is union organizing. Now, it would be easier to say we should all participate in union organizing if the unions were more open to community support. Community participation is still sort of an avant garde idea among union leaders. They don't utilize it enough. The UPS strike was enormously popular, but I didn't see any sign from the Teamsters that they knew how to exploit that popularity. If the strike had gone on a little longer, and the strike fund went dry, was there any plan to utilize the support of people who were saying, "It's about time"? No, there wasn't.

Some of this kind of organizing is, in fact, coming from outside of unions right now. ACORN is organizing workfare recipients. That's very important. We don't have to wait on the unions. People can get organized, and then I'm sure the unions will be glad to affiliate with them and take their dues.

Another thing I think is very important, at a time when we don't have access to government power, is direct action against sadistic and abusive corporations, such as the sweatshop-dependent corporations: Nike and Disney and so on. It would be great if the government would just regulate these guys out of existence, or ban the sale of any sweatshop-derived product. But it is not doing that. So, we can spend forever in Washington, begging some congresspeople to listen to us, or we can go right out and hit the streets, and shame that corporation. And, hopefully, we'll be paving the way for real government regulation at some point.

A third thing is to create alternative institutions that can simultaneously meet needs for people, serve as gathering places, and be springboards for further political action. Some of the people organizing workfare and former welfare recipients are proposing storefront centers where you could get some employment counseling, you could learn about workers' rights (such as they are), and you could find out about organizing and get in touch with some union reps. Maybe participants could start a child care co-op, or whatever.

These kinds of things recognize the necessity for bold action even when, and perhaps especially when, we don't have many friends in government.

SEP: What else?

BE: I'm not talking about really expensive, fancy things, since we have no way of doing expensive, fancy things. They have to be pretty improvised. There are a lot of things I don't know enough about but that I think are interesting. For example, the idea of community currency as a way of valuing people's labor in a way that multinational corporations don't.

SEP: You mentioned the "marble theory of social change" in a *Z Magazine* interview. What is that?

BE: You have to ask the framer of this important theory, who's a union staffmember named George Kohl. This was his idea: that you don't know what you are doing all the time, you don't know what kind of effect your actions are having, but you know that if you keep flipping marbles—I never played marbles as a kid, so I don't even know the vocabulary here—at a big crowd of other marbles, eventually, bit by bit, they all might start moving.

It helps me to think of my own work that way. I have my own marbles to roll, but if enough other people are rolling

them, too, the mass may start moving in a good or at least less suicidal direction.

SEP: Do you see any ways that progressives can find common ground with people who haven't aligned themselves with the left? Do you think it is more important to be a principled minority than it is to build broad alliances, with all the compromises that entails?

BE: I don't think those are alternatives. You can't be part of a coalition if you have no principles. Why bother? You have to have your own identity and principles, but you have to work in coalitions and alliances with all sorts of people.

Feminist and pro-reproductive rights as I am, I can see working with, say, the Catholic bishops on some economic justice issues because they were good on opposing welfare reform. I think it is important to make a principled alignment with particular groups around particular issues. The left doesn't always do that very well.

The depressing thing at many left gatherings I've been to is this sort of purism. I was speaking on a panel recently, and somebody mentioned Ben and Jerry's as an example of socially responsible business. Some guy in the audience jumps up at question time to talk about how they exploit cows or something. Please!



BELL HOOKS

Critical Consciousness for Political Resistance

BELL HOOKS is the author of numerous critically acclaimed and widely influential books on the politics of race, gender, and class. Her work as a political thinker and cultural critic has introduced many people to radical feminist theory and action, and she is in high demand as a speaker nationwide. Her first book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (SEP, 1981), was named one of the "twenty most influential women's books of the last twenty years" by *Publishers Weekly*. Hooks has published six other books with South End Press, including *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* and *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. She is currently a Professor of English at City College, City University of New York.

SOUTH END PRESS: Your work on radical black feminism has been an inspiration for many young feminists of color, and you yourself were in your early 20s when you wrote your first book, *Ain't I a Woman*. What differences do you see in the political and cultural climate that young progressive activists face today, compared to when you were formulating your own politics?

BELL HOOKS: One of the major differences I see in the political climate today is that there is less collective support for coming to critical consciousness—in communities, in institutions, among friends. For example, when I was coming to feminist consciousness—as one aspect of my political consciousness—at Stanford University, there was a tremendous buzz about feminism throughout the campus. Women were organizing in the dorms, women were resisting biased curriculum, all of those things. So, it really offered a kind of overall support for coming to consciousness, whereas what so frequently happens now in academic settings is that people feel much more that they don't have this kind of collective support.

SEP: What do you think has contributed to that change?

BH: The institutionalization of Black Studies, Feminist Studies, all of these things led to a sense that the struggle was over for a lot of people and that one did not have to continue the personal consciousness-raising and changing of one's viewpoint.

SEP: Could you describe some of the influences on your own politicization? In your writing you have focused very much on your development as a woman, as a writer, and as a

critic and political thinker. Could you describe that process?

BH: One of the issues that I continually write about is that the words we use to define political positions—whether we talk about being on the left or being feminist—do not mean that people may not have arrived at positions of resistance that could be clearly described by that language *before* they come to that language. In my case, I've talked a great deal about how growing up in a very patriarchal household was the setting for my development of resistance. But it was not until the organized contemporary feminist movement that I was able to give a name to that resistance.

The movement for social justice that had most affected my life prior to the feminist movement was the '60s Civil Rights movement, the '60s Black Power movement, especially because the town that I grew up in, like many southern towns, was still very racially segregated, despite the existing laws that argued against discrimination and penalized it. I grew up in a world where we were integrating the schools for the first time, much later than integration had occurred in other parts of the United States. I remember going to school when I was 16 years old with the National Guard, with a sense that we had to sacrifice, in many ways, our comfort as Black people. Before, I had attended all-Black schools where we certainly thought we belonged, and were affirmed.

That was the beginning for me of an awakening to the incredible dilemma of racism and white supremacy in this society: to have to face as a teenager that the legal demand to end racism and segregation didn't affect our lives at all, because people continued the social mores of racial apartheid despite what the government had stated. So, I had a real sense of conservative white anarchy, that white people in the South who were racist did not care what the government was saying about desegregation. They were going to con-

tinue the discriminatory practices that had governed their lives, and they didn't care. That was a real awakening moment for me, to see that white supremacy as a political ideology governing the social mores of our lives was stronger for many white people than any injunction of the state.

I think we're seeing that kind of political anarchy, conservative anarchy, returning now as white, militaristic, racist organizations, the neo-nazi parties, all of these kinds of white supremacist organizations, are rising up now and opposing the state.

SEP: You have also written about some of the conflicts you faced coming out of that segregated setting and coming to a college campus with a liberal attitude. Could you talk about the kinds of issues that brought up?

BH: Going to Stanford as an undergraduate and moving from the South to California really was the experience that made me think about demography and geography in the United States and the degree to which geographical location often informed one's take on issues of race, gender, and class. To move from such a provincial, conservative, fundamentalist Christian-based life in the South to this liberal area of Palo Alto, which had an old population then—it was not built up by the Silicon Valley as it is now—was a big, big shift for me.

But, again, it was a shift that produced lots of awakenings about the reality of class. Many people forget that when we had racial segregation as the total absolute norm in this society, it was impossible for Black people to live away from one another, so you didn't have some Black middle-class community or upper-class community that was completely cut off from working-class and poor Black communities. Part of what was happening, and that we're seeing the fruits of

now, was that racial integration was ushering in a new division among Black people—not that Black people hadn't experienced different social standing in our all-Black communities, but the fact is that people had a much more intimate understanding of experiences across class.

SEP: You mentioned the idea of coming to political consciousness without necessarily having the words to describe or express it, and your work is notable in that it has reached many readers who may not initially describe themselves as progressive. Do you think there are limitations in the way that the left has addressed its audience that has kept it from broadening its base?

BH: One of the greatest difficulties the left faces in reaching out to masses of people in America is its profound disrespect of spirituality and religious life. Books like Stephen Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief* remind us that more than 80 percent of the people in this nation lay claim to religious faith, whether it be Islam, Judeo-Christian faith, Buddhist faith. People on the left need to acknowledge—we need to grapple with—the question of religion.

SEP: Within the feminist movement, the divisions have often been cast in terms of race—the line is that the white, middle-class feminist movement doesn't address women of color....

BH: You just hit upon one of the big difficulties of the mass media response to feminist movement, because the very same women of color who demanded that feminism call attention to race were usually also demanding a recognition of class. But the larger, more mainstream media—and that includes the media generated by reformist white feminists, that is to say, the books they published, the confer-

ences they held and hold—tend to refuse to acknowledge the extent to which women of color, and Black women specifically, were almost always *also* calling attention to class. There was never just an intervention that said, “Oh, you’re racist, pay attention to race only.” There was always a recognition that race and class positionality were so linked that it was impossible to talk about race without talking about class. When women of color critique privileged-class, white feminism, people often hear that as simply a racial critique, but, in fact, it is a critique rooted in an understanding of the dynamics of class and race as they work together to create biases.

SEP: Are some of the left critiques of “identity politics” obscuring the same things?

BH: Absolutely. I mean, if we just take Native American thinkers as an example, there is no Native American progressive thinker who has not called attention to the reality of class while talking about the fate of Native American Indians in this culture, because it’s impossible to talk about Native American peoples without talking about the reality of class divisions—without talking about the fact that the takeover of American Indian land by the American government was essentially a strategy of class disempowerment as much as it was a gesture of racism. We, as people of color on the left, have never not evoked the issue of class. But what’s interesting is that we are often perceived as not talking about class at all because we often don’t talk about class by using the language and terminology that was most accepted by the radical white left.

SEP: What other lessons do you see that we have yet to learn on the left?

BH: I think the most difficult lesson for people on the left to understand, especially those people who are on the left but situated in privileged-class realities, is what really links various struggles of liberation and what empowers people to connect with one another. For example, my disappointment in the position that people like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West have taken on welfare, or joining with the Million Man March—which was so conservative politically in its critique of welfare and its support of militarism and imperialism—as Cornel West did, comes from seeing how patriarchy on the left, whether it's expressed by Black men and other men of color, or more powerful white spokesmen on the left, continues to provide a skewed vision that does not allow for meaningful political solidarity between men and women because it always divides our interests.

SEP: What keeps you engaging in the dialogues and debates that focus on those points of contention?

BH: Dialectical exchange is about engagement, and even when I disagree with Cornel West or other Black male thinkers, more conservative ones like Stanley Crouch, or more biased ones like Adolph Reed, I feel it's important to keep open a space for dialogue. By and large, most Black male thinkers don't show any interest in dialoguing with Black women, and I don't think it's any accident that as Cornel West has become more firmly situated within a mainstream, patriarchal, white institution like Harvard, he has been less interested in dialoguing across boundaries with myself and other progressive thinkers who don't agree with a lot of the positions that he now takes.

SEP: What achievements of the left have given you hope for the future, and where is there room for success?

BH: We have to recognize that to the degree that revolutionary feminism critiques and intervenes on racism, class elitism, and sexism, which includes homophobia, it is the most left movement that we have in our nation. The traditional white male left leadership has never fully divested of its allegiance to patriarchy, and therefore it never has offered us a truly hopeful vision of liberation. The economic insights of the intellectual, radical, white male left were rarely coupled with a wise understanding of the dynamics of race and gender. And I don't think that we have any male-dominated left thinking that has truly been anti-patriarchal. I think of people like Noam Chomsky—whose work certainly inspires and enlightens me, but if you read his books and look at the people he refers to, they're almost always men, and gender is always subordinated. So, to me, radical feminism—and I'm making a real distinction here between reform feminism and revolutionary feminism, which I believe is a left politics—has had the most far-reaching, hopeful intervention of any contemporary social movement.

And let me say why. Revolutionary left feminist politics created the space for us to take differences in wages between women and men seriously. It created the space for us to critique the patriarchal family's support and perpetuation of violence, both at home and outside. It reawakened, through its critique of masculinity, a strong demand that men take a stand against militarism and imperialism. And because so many other groups have appropriated the issues that radical, revolutionary, left feminism put on the agenda, it seems as though those groups were always dealing with those issues. But people often do not give praise to contemporary revolutionary feminists' actions for really breaking down certain kind of barriers. It is assumed by so many people that unions that never thought about the fate of

women in the workplace just *do* that now, not that they do that because, in fact, feminism brought attention to that reality.

Revolutionary feminism is the one example we have of a protracted struggle for social justice in our society where the people involved in that movement have actually consciously grown. That is to say, when we look at where feminism was—for example, reformist feminism, on the issue of race—and where revolutionary feminism took the thinking, it will never be possible for white women of privileged classes to act as though their experience is the female experience. It is no longer possible for any white feminist from a privileged class position to act as though race and class do not matter.

I find revolutionary feminism more compelling than other left politics because of our willingness to acknowledge when our thinking and strategies for social change are wrong—for example, feminists' support of no-fault divorce. Feminists spearheaded support for no-fault divorce, but later realized that when you had no-fault divorce, the people who suffered the most were women who were in long-term marriages who had not been in the workforce and who did not have the earning power of the men they might be divorcing. But feminists didn't just hunker down and insist, "We took this stand, and we have to stand by it." People were able to engage in self-critique and say, "We were not clear about how we approached these issues." I think we've seen the same self-criticism in revolutionary feminism's acknowledgment that early on, white, western, privileged women's ways of looking at women in the Third World and women in other nations, less privileged nations, was skewed by imperialism and colonialism and what Edward Said so accurately described as "Orientalism."

Often these kinds of self-reflexive critiques within revolutionary feminist movements for social justice never get

acknowledged because the mainstream isn't interested in portraying this movement as one that has grown, that has changed, that is not spearheaded simply by liberal women like Gloria Steinem or the original white mother figure, Betty Friedan. There is tremendous radical writing by left white women and other groups of women that people don't acknowledge in the mainstream. I think, for example, of Charlotte Bunch, a white lesbian feminist who has really tried to make interventions in international relations around how western women approach people of color in other parts of the world.

SEP: Do you see any changes in the way that young men today envision masculinity and gender issues? Do you see any kind of transformation within the new generations?

BH: A major intervention of the feminist movement, both reformist and radical, has been in contrast to what the mass media tells us and continues to try to sell: that feminists don't like men. Feminists have always been very aware that if we don't get males involved in feminist thinking and actions, we will not be able to change the heart of sexism. So, there was this tremendous shift in the early to mid-'70s around our thinking about the place of men in feminist movements. And we began to see change. The changes that were the fruit of feminist labor came when so many men, young men, became involved in feminist thinking and taking Women's Studies classes.

We are about to witness a new generation of men about to be 30 who were completely born into a world altered by feminist thinking. I must have been almost 40 before I saw a woman pilot, but there are men in our society now whose mothers are those women pilots. So, we have for the first time a generation of men coming to adulthood who were not

born into a world automatically submerged with sexist socialization that says that women are not the intellectual or work equals of men. In fact, they were born into a world where that fiction, that false consciousness, was being challenged on all levels. Part of the reason why feminism became such a threat to our culture in the last ten years is because of the radical critical consciousness of these young men, who are as daring in their critiques of gender as many of us were when we were first coming to feminist thinking when we were 18 years old. That's a tremendous threat to the culture, particularly to the militarism of the culture. Any profound critique of patriarchal masculinity that touches the minds and hearts of men of all ages in our culture threatens patriarchy in such a way that it engenders fierce backlash. It is no accident that the arenas where we have most worked to raise male consciousness—around domestic violence, reproductive rights for women, sexual harassment—have been the space of patriarchal, anti-feminist backlash.

And it's no accident that in popular culture, particularly in movies, we have seen a return to pro-imperialist, pro-patriarchal, masculinist movies, where a certain notion of male citizenship is revived that is patriarchal to its core. Simultaneously, of course, we see a film like *G.I. Jane*, where sexism is being questioned, but only inasmuch as it reinforces the existing white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal state. So, *G.I. Jane* becomes one of the prime examples of how reformist feminist thinking gets incorporated by the existing state structure to reinscribe its own values, as opposed to actually engaging in any type of radical, transformational questioning.

SEP: As a cultural critic and a writer, you have explored how radical transformation can take place in part through the relationship of art and politics. Could you talk about how

you've been able to walk the line between political commitment and aesthetic appreciation?

BH: I've had two very strong literary mentors, Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin, and both of them were people who loudly proclaimed that there is no art that is politically neutral. These two artists, then, who were both creative writers and social critics, were people who really embraced the notion of artistic integrity and artistic excellence, while at the same time insisting that artists could not remain divorced from politics. As mentor figures who entered my life when I was 17 and 18, as did African thinkers such as Amílcar Cabral and Kwame Nkrumah, they were all people who embraced an understanding of the critical thinker and/or intellectual as somebody who could have a multi-dimensional self, where you could champion literary excellence and at the same time still see creative writing as a location where progressive political values and beliefs could be realized aesthetically.

To me, there isn't a line to be walked. It's part of a false consciousness of the existing mainstream, dominant culture that one should have to struggle between one's political beliefs and one's aesthetic and artistic vision. We don't act as if Shakespeare had to struggle between his political beliefs and his artistic vision. In fact, what we now know through incredibly wonderful Shakespearean scholarship is that his art mirrored a lot of his political vision, and that this does not make it less artistic. Again and again, what we see is that whenever people on the left allow their political visions to be overtly expressed in artistic creations, that is called into question. But with an artist like Vermeer, whose class affiliations were completely present in the type of images he painted—or Gauguin, with his particular colonialist and Orientalist way of viewing the Third World and Third

World women—this was not seen as something that inhibited their capacity to offer us transcendent artistic vision. Yet whenever it's a question of the left deploying similar art strategies, it's always viewed by the mainstream as a vehicle to suggest that our artistic work is diminished.

SEP: There has been a lot of criticism of many of the left media organizations because they remain very heavily dominated by white, privileged males, and have yet to bring in different editorial views and different writers. Do you see any movement in that area at all?

BH: I don't see a lot of movement in that area. But the issue is not that an organization on the left is all white, because theoretically, if white people are progressive—have truly engaged in radical consciousness or *concientización*—I would like to believe that we could have a setting where everything's run by white people, but the perspectives are not biased. In the same way that I feel that as a Black woman I could be the head of a company or the head of a university or the publisher of a magazine, but my being Black wouldn't mean that I would focus the magazine only in the direction of what Black people might be interested in or concerned about. It's really important for us to remember that, while diversity is meaningful, the essence of divesting of all of these things is that you should not need the presence of women or the presence of people of color of both genders in order to have progressive, non-biased action take place.

To offer an example: One class reality is that the writing we do on the left is the least financially lucrative writing you can do in our culture. Many of the young white people who have come into their writing often come from circumstances of economic privilege, so their choice to work for a left press and make very little money may not mean that they will

never be able to buy a house, because they may be given support from other family members who have access to money, or they may inherit money. So, part of the difficulty we've had throughout the history of the left in America is that it's much more difficult to get people of color and white people who are poor to invest their livelihood in writing and cultural production that has no financial return.

One of the reasons I became a professor and have kept my job up until right now—I'm on leave, but I would like to leave my academic job—was so I would have the freedom to be able to write dissident work without having to depend on that work for my livelihood. That's a very luxurious position, but it's important for me to say that strategically, I didn't just enter the realm of radical political thinking and writing hoping that it would be the place where I would make my living. I entered this realm knowing that it was *not* the place where I would make my living.

It's about having a radical political commitment to ending domination that is powerful enough, and a love of justice that is intense enough, that it makes me want to spend those hours when I'm not making a living doing work that I feel will have a meaningful impact and raise consciousness. In my case, I've also been fortunate to live in a historical period where that work has begun to generate a certain amount of money. That was not the case as late as ten years ago. This suggests there is a mood in the culture where many people are seeking to understand the nature of injustice, and seeking ways to be politically engaged and ways to resist. That's very important. It's a sign of hope. Hope is essential to any political struggle for radical change when the overall social climate promotes disillusionment and despair.



PETER KWONG

Fighting for Social Justice Is the Mission

PETER KWONG is Professor of Sociology at the City University of New York Graduate Center and is Professor of Urban Affairs and Planning and Director of the Asian American Studies Program at Hunter College/CUNY. He is the author of several books on labor history and activism, including *The New Chinatown* (Hill and Wang, revised edition, 1996) and *Forbidden Workers: Illegal Chinese Immigrants and American Labor* (New Press, 1998), and he has produced several television documentaries and news reports for PBS and NBC. Kwong serves on the boards of the International Center for Migration, Ethnicity and Citizenship and the Chinese Staff and Workers Association, among other organizations. His articles on immigration and labor politics have appeared in a number of publications, including *The Village Voice* and *The Nation*.

SOUTH END PRESS: How did you get involved with the Chinatown community, and how did you begin doing your political work and research?

PETER KWONG: I was involved in the anti-war movement as early as 1965, when I was still attending Columbia University on a student visa. At that time, I was one of the very few Asians participating in the anti-war demonstrations. But as I got more involved and met a lot more people in the movement, especially during the Columbia University Strike of 1968, I realized that the issue of race in the Vietnam War had not been raised. It was quite clear to me that the reason the United States could execute this war so brutally was because Vietnamese were people of a different race.

It's ironic that 1998 is the 30-year anniversary of the My Lai Massacre. We are reminded that U.S. troops could kill hundreds of innocent women and children in cold blood, and this fact, it seems to me, stands as a testimony to the racial aspect of the war that I believed the white anti-war movement people were ignoring. They were talking mainly along the lines of, "bring the boys home," which the Nixon administration was quite willing to do, as long as the attack against Vietnam still went on through continued bombing and what Nixon called the "Vietnamization of the war," i.e., letting Asians go on killing Asians. It was at that point that I stopped being a part of the anti-war movement and began working with other Asian radicals.

A few of us came to the same conclusion that many African Americans had already come to: we realized that the war was a racist war. In New York, Asians began to hang out with the Black Panthers and the Young Lords, and realized that

any meaningful political involvement meant going to our own communities to serve our own people; that we should go back to our own communities and organize. In my case this meant going to Chinatown—although Chinatown was not my community to begin with, in that I did not grow up there, I did not know anyone there, nor was I from a working-class background. I was simply a foreign student, but still I felt that Chinatown was where I should be. The group that I was originally close to was I Wor Kuen—the forerunner of the Chinese Progressive Association.

SEP: What was Chinatown like at that time? Were the business elites that you talk about in your books already emerging as the power that they are now?

PK: Oh, yeah, the Chinatown establishment had long existed, presiding over a community of extreme poverty. When we first came to Chinatown, the majority of the population there were elderly male immigrants, who had been in the U.S. for a long time and had left their wives and children back in China, but could not return home because of the civil war there. So, in the late '60s, Chinatown was a poor, isolated ghetto, by all measures. It was precisely because of these kinds of conditions that we felt very comfortable ideologically with what the Blacks and Latinos were talking about: we, too, were oppressed, from both a class and a racial perspective.

SEP: What ideas did you bring from your work in the anti-war movement, from the issues that the old left was talking about, to this new political context?

PK: The late '60s was a period of tremendous optimism. It was a period when somehow all oppressed people around the world were fighting back. Young people in China were challenging their political establishment. We were all in-

spired by the Vietnamese, who showed us that even a small and backward nation could stand up against the world's greatest power. And in the capitalist countries like France and Germany, all these students, young people, were also demanding reforms from their political leadership. So that was the idea: we were hoping to bring this kind of radical change, social change, that was going on in the rest of the world, to our own communities.

That's when we realized, of course, how strongly the business establishment controlled the community. And, in some ways, the kind of radical messages we were trying to inject into the community were not entirely relevant, were not accepted, not even among the poor and disenfranchised. And so we tried various different things. Some of us decided to set up service projects to serve the people, to get involved in food co-ops, health clinics. Through these activities we thought we could reach the people.

Still, we were not very successful. There was still a distance between us: we were talking about radical social change; the people were concerned about daily survival. The only issue we were able to break through on was the issue of nationalism. For instance, even though Chinatown residents were not interested in socialist ideas, they were interested in seeing movies from mainland China, even though these movies were from a socialist point of view, because these movies showed that China was strong, China had stood up—and this message was getting some response from the community, a sense of nationalistic pride. And that was disturbing to us.

In any event, there was always this gap between Asian American radicals—many of them American-born, college-educated young people who did not speak Chinese—and the mainly working-class, aging Chinatown community, which did not speak English. And so there was this friction, this

gap. We kept asking ourselves what was wrong with what we were doing.

We were going through many changes. And, like many of the other radical groups at the beginning of the '70s, with the fading away of radicalism in the United States and the ensuing backlash, and with the student movement going back to middle-class issues, we felt let down. We began retreating from the community and engaging in abstract and theoretical debates. Some of us looked for answers in various kinds of theories, including Marxism. As our approach became more abstract, the divisions within the movement became ever more divisive and sectarian. I was very much involved in that process as well. But most of all I realized that something was wrong with the way we were trying to organize in our community. I began to look for answers in studying the Chinese community seriously.

I started to do research on the '30s and '40s; that, too, had been a period of international upheaval, and there had been a lot of radicalism going on in the United States, in China, and in the world in general. I wanted to find out what impact these events had on the Chinese communities in the United States. And, interestingly enough, I discovered that some very serious activism had gone on in Chinatown at that time, too; in fact, there was a similar group of Chinese activists who had used the same kind of radical approach to effect change as we did in the '60s, and they failed, too. So, that led me to use the study of the Chinatown history of the '30s to self-analyze, to be self-critical of what we were doing.

The conclusion I came to about the '30s was that the radicals were trying to apply Marxist revolutionary ideology in communities where the capitalistic class formation had not yet occurred. Namely, the Chinatown economy at that time consisted mainly of small, family-run businesses, and you

could not talk about class contradictions within a context where the owner of a laundry was a family member. However, that does not mean that there were no class contradictions. There were contradictions between these small, self-employed businesses and the feudal traditional associations which were controlled by an elite of landlords and large shop-owners. There was actually a very interesting democratic movement in the '30s, led by the laundrymen against the traditional institutions. But the Marxist radicals did not bother to organize them, nor could they apply the classical theory of class struggle onto a community without the class formation in the classical sense. This is how I realized what went wrong with my own work.

By the late '70s, I had dropped out of most of what I would consider "sectarian" organizations. I don't regret that I joined them, but I feel that we did not have the practical experience to know what we did wrong. In the late '70s, I met up with the Chinese Staff and Workers Association and began to work with labor organizers who themselves came from the workers' ranks, to organize first restaurant waiters, then garment workers. By then, the class structure of Chinatown had changed, as the manufacturing industries began to move in. The workers in these large new garment factories and restaurants were no longer relatives of the owners, so the class formation and polarization was quite clear. This is when I was able to bring my years of studying and analysis to bear on my community work once again, as I took a more active role in the new struggle.

But, this time, I had to learn to be an activist intellectual, which is different from being an activist, and different from being an intellectual. There had been a period of time when I saw myself as an activist and was totally involved in organizing, but that is not what my major contribution can or ought to be.

Since I am an intellectual, my work should be to study and to analyze. My real contribution can be in not doing so from an outside observer's point of view. All too many scholars are outside observers; they are not participants in the events they describe and dissect, not part of the movement's history. I feel that my knowledge should be gained from being part of the struggle, from having actually participated in the policy and tactical debates among the organizers, but not as a member of the leadership. Rather, my job is to listen to what people are telling me and to try to understand the issues from the point of view of participants in the nitty-gritty conflicts.

It is a difficult role, because there is always this tendency—being an intellectual and being somebody who has a lot of political analytical skills—to say, “Hey, this is the way things ought to be.” I do think that a lot of problems with the left movement have been rooted in this. Many radicals see themselves as the movement. In other words, their attitude is, “You’ve got a problem? Okay, we’re going to do this and this and that and get a lawyer,” and pretty soon *they* become the movement, not the workers. A group like Chinese Staff and Workers has to struggle with this tendency all the time, as it strives to remain a real rank-and-file workers’ movement, rather than an organization that carries out policies in accordance with a well-informed theoretical design.

Of course, this leaves me with a complicated role to play. When I try to participate, I’m always seen as a professor, a scholar. Even though my scholarship is not traditional, still people have problems recognizing that. So, hard as I try, I’m still often seen as an outsider.

SEP: Could you talk a little bit about what you think is important for young activists today to take as the legacy from people who were active in the '60s and '70s?

PK: I think what I've learned over the years is the importance of understanding the larger framework of struggle. A lot of my peers dropped out in the late '70s because they saw things actually going backwards—civil rights going backwards, the power of American corporations actually in ascendance—so they felt disappointed or discouraged. However, it seems to me that we need to understand the world in much more macro as well as historical terms. Not only should we know that what we do is right, but that in historical terms, in fact, things are developing our way. There are times when the movement is in low ebb, but there will always be a time when things will come to a head, when we can win. Without that kind of macro-historical appreciation, we will get discouraged. At the same time, without theoretical knowledge about the basic contradictions in America and in the world system, we won't know how to take advantage of the situation when the conditions for our action are right. My advice is that we ought not be satisfied just because we are doing good deeds, but that we should try to make long-term changes in the system, and we can only strive to do that if we have a strong theoretical understanding of the world system in historical context. Only this kind of understanding will pull us through and direct us through a long haul.

As far as I am concerned, understanding of Marxism is critical. It helps me to appreciate the basic contradiction of the capitalist system. It also helps me to get through difficult times. I think that the late '70s were a very, very depressing time, but I got less discouraged as I realized that this was a global process, not only occurring in the United States, but other places as well. It helps to know that even when things get worse, the contradictions are playing themselves out. The higher the reactionary forces rise, the lower they will fall. That's what I hope that people will look for.

SEP: In your book *Forbidden Workers* you describe undocumented workers, in particular Chinese workers, as in some ways at the forefront of the future of labor organizing, and you have a lot to say about the failure of the labor movement, of organized labor, to recognize this. Could you elaborate on what you mean by that?

PK: I'm trying to say that with the restructuring of the U.S. economy, capital took away the safety net and labor protection from workers. The working conditions of all American workers have deteriorated. To introduce division among American workers, capital introduced immigrants into the workplace because they are vulnerable and exploitable. In the case of illegal immigrants, they are suffering the most extreme degradation. And yet immigrants are part of the American working class. So, instead of looking at them as foreigners who belong to a particular ethnic group and ignoring them, we would do better to organize them and to ensure that the deterioration of their labor conditions does not continue unchecked. If American workers cannot fight together with immigrants and racial minorities, the conditions now suffered by illegal immigrants spell out the future conditions for all workers. That's what I'm trying to get at.

SEP: There have been a few recent cases in which immigrant workers have been able to make some gains, for example, in the suit against Jessica McClintock for subcontracting work to a garment factory that failed to pay its workers, and in the Jing Fong restaurant case, in which a waiter brought suit against management for withholding wages and tips owed to employees. Do you see any long-lasting lessons from those successes?

PK: I think what we have is an overall system in total disintegration. I'm not only talking about labor enforcement

and labor protection systems, but also about the labor movement and organized labor. In other words, every institution that in some way supposedly protects workers is falling apart.

What makes us optimistic is that the victims will eventually fight back. Theoretically, the attack from capital will make workers' resistance weaker and weaker, increasingly less able to sustain a labor movement, but if you look at the Chinatown cases, if you look at some Latino cases, even with these overwhelming forces of oppression against them, there's always somebody fighting back. Very small, maybe, but they are fighting back.

In the case of the Wei Chang garment factory, with the owners owing the workers thousands of dollars in back wages, and with many of them being illegals, they said, "We've had it. How much farther do you want us to drop?" A number of them said, "Even if I'm going to be deported, I still want to fight and get my money back." In the Jing Fong case, one person basically said, "You shouldn't be stealing tips from the workers." Nobody else in the restaurant dared to come forward. The Chinatown establishment, everybody attacked this one worker who dared to challenge the management. Even a report from *The New York Times* sided with the management and criticized the worker. There seemed to be nobody standing on his side. And yet, he prevailed. And yet, some decent people—in this case it happened to be a Republican state attorney general—came out and said, "Hey, this is just not right," and investigated, and the truth came out.

So, it is these tiny little struggles that really show that the more extreme the degradation, the more this opposition will come forward. It's very heartening to see this when you witness the mainstream labor movement daily backing away from the fight, giving back this, rolling back that. Granted,

we are talking about very, very minute struggles—in these Chinatown cases, the fights are not about low wages and long hours but just getting back wages for work already done—nevertheless, they give us room for optimism.

In some cases, the unions are cooperating with the management in silencing the workers, and yet people want to fight back. They may not win, but nevertheless, they stand up because to them what is wrong is wrong.

SEP: In your book you also address some of the legal remedies and law enforcement solutions that would go a long way toward alleviating some of the problems undocumented immigrants face. You discuss the conflicts between Immigration and Naturalization Service policy and the Department of Labor. Do you have much optimism about those kinds of institutions?

PK: On the surface, my discussion of counting on law enforcement is a bourgeois way of addressing the problem—that is to say, if things get so bad, the institutions will be embarrassed and will have to do something about it. But without pressure, these institutions may never act, and so that is why my book ultimately talks about the need for a labor movement. If the labor rank-and-file do not fight back, in the long run, they will not get very far. But if just a few workers stand up, they're going to have much more of an impact than anybody thinks. The management and the system are afraid of the rank-and-file people standing up. Yes, if the workers step forward, then the institutions will have to react. That's why the liberal social democratic system in Europe and the U.S. was built, not because of good will, good wishes from FDR or anybody else. It was the powerful rank-and-file movement that was mobilized in the '20s and '30s that forced the system to change. The strength comes from the bottom, not from the top.

SEP: It's very telling that it takes something like the Golden Venture disaster—in which a ship carrying undocumented workers smuggled in from China ran ashore in New York—to really embarrass people enough so that they will start talking about these issues.

PK: Yes, but if you don't keep talking about it and keep up the pressure, people will forget and move onto some other issues. I think this is where being an Asian American activist really makes a difference. If I were not directly involved, if I just talked about the issues in the classrooms and within academic circles, my understanding of the issues would be out-of-date and irrelevant. This is the most important lesson for academics: our role is to make people understand the need for action and help them mobilize, not to believe that we are the force behind change, or that we should do things for the people—we should work with the people.

SEP: Are there ways in which the left ought to be creating more coalitions or alliances with people who have not traditionally aligned themselves with the left? Are there ways in which we should be trying to broaden the movement?

PK: We all talk about making alliances, and there are many alliances. But, again, many activists tend to see themselves as the movement, as the representatives of the movement to these alliances. So, people say, "Let's form a coalition," but when you look to see who is in the coalition, it's all people like ourselves, individuals with no political base, speaking for practically nobody.

I think this is where the problems really come in. We need to build genuine coalitions, built from the bottom up, with real mass support. This is difficult, but that's the task.

There have been some efforts of this type going on, especially among minority workers fighting to break into re-

stricted unions. For instance, in New York City right now, you have construction unions that still refuse to admit Asians, Blacks, and Latinos. That's where coalitions could be built. The obstacles come from within the unions, from their own members, and from outside, from their "leftist" supporters. Right now, we have a situation where, when a minority worker wants to join the union, the union says, "We don't have any jobs ourselves, we can't let you in." The white radicals are saying, "You are killing the labor movement by challenging it." So, many white radicals, labor activists, still do not see incorporation of Asian, African American, and Latino workers as a progressive political issue. They see the situation as a zero-sum game: if they have to include the Blacks, it's going to weaken their unions further. They don't realize that by including the unorganized workers, we are actually strengthening the power of the working-class movement as a whole.

SEP: What do you think will draw young people, especially Asian Americans, into political activism or scholarship, or a combination, and what do you think are the priorities for the future that are going to motivate young people for the next generation?

PK: I come from the old tradition of community activism, and I entered into Asian American Studies from that end. I think that Asian American Studies today, like many other Ethnic Studies programs, is too much into studying identity as though identity is an inactive, objective thing. Identity is interactive, and the objective of strengthening it is to fight against oppression and against racism. The objective of defining identity should not be an abstract theoretical exercise. In fact, the original mission of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies was to end racism, in the spirit of the

larger struggle for equality and social justice. I think we should never forget that we are not fighting just for Asians, but for all people. That's why studying identity politics as an intellectual exercise has become very boring for many young students. Increasingly, they have been telling me, "You know, we're getting fed up with all the speakers talking about the same images and identities," and I agree. There is too much of a tendency among the identity scholars to portray Asians as though, "We are the victim." Yes, we are the victim, but what's the point of dwelling on that? We should be talking about how we can change that. A lot of times we are missing the point. Somehow, we feel that we are the only victims, and that ends up as the only thing that's important. I don't think that's what our struggle should be about. The struggle is about human social justice for all, and that's how I got into the movement to begin with.

I have no problem with identity politics, if identity politics gives us strength to mobilize. Identity only matters in contact and in struggle with others. Otherwise, it is nothing but an empty self-indulgence. Moreover, identity politics tends to obscure the vision of what is really going on. In my institution, my academic colleagues think that as director of an Asian American Studies program I must be dealing only with issues of ethnic pride, ethnic identity, and all that kind of stuff they find irrelevant, and they don't pay much attention to it; they don't bother to find out what I'm really talking about. On the other hand, when I'm with Asian Americans, they say, "Why are you always digging out these internal problems within the Asian American communities? Why are you projecting an ugly image of your own people to the outsiders?" But I'm fighting for social justice. Racism against Asians is wrong, but it is also wrong for Asians to oppress and exploit their own kind. I cannot keep silent on that.



WINONA LADUKE

Power Is in the Earth

WINONA LADUKE is an Anishinabe (Ojibwe) enrolled member of the Mississippi Band Anishinabeg. She is the Executive Director of the Honor the Earth Fund and Campaign Director for the White Earth Land Recovery Project. As an organizer of opposition to the James Bay II hydroelectric project, she was named "the most prominent Native American environmental activist" by several publications, and in 1994, was named by *Time* as one of America's 50 most promising leaders under 40 years of age. In 1996, she served as Ralph Nader's running mate in the Green Party, and in 1997, with the Indigo Girls, she was named a Ms. Woman of the Year. In 1988, she received the Reebok Human Rights Award. A former board member of Greenpeace U.S.A., LaDuke serves as co-chair of the Indigenous Women's Network. She is currently writing a book about Native environmentalism for South End Press.

SOUTH END PRESS: My first question is about your tour with the Indigo Girls. Tell me about that. How did the project evolve? What are the advantages and disadvantages of working with popular artists?

WINONA LADUKE: Since the '70s, we've done various shows with performing artists, mostly to draw attention to Native environmental or community issues. We are so far out of the mainstream consciousness that it has helped to support our struggles.

We did tours with the Indigo Girls in '93, '95, and '97. First, we did a three-show tour, and they were so encouraged by it that they expanded it, and we did two 21-show tours. We raised about \$500,000 and generated about 100,000 political action cards to various political officials on issues ranging from nuclear waste policy to cleanup of a remote Alaskan Native village called Point Hope. We had some successes. We did get the beginning of the cleanup of Point Hope, and we did get a moratorium on gold mining in a sacred site area in Montana.

I think that the tours mean that the message about Native communities gets to an audience that wouldn't necessarily hear it. And that in itself is powerful. By and large, Indigo Girls fans are young white women in their early 20s. We pose two issues from the stage. One is, no means no. You cannot poison us. The community has a right to draw a line. And the second question is, who gets to control the future of America? Is it you and I, the people, or is that future the rightful domain of big corporations?

The downside? Does it feed into the mythology that reality is about superstars? To an extent. But those women are

very much about the process of change. They are involved in it because they are human. They are articulate, thoughtful women, who are activists in their own right. On the tour, they have someone who they look up to say: "We feel that to do the right thing in America, you have to do the right thing by Native people." That is a good thing for someone to say.

SEP: Can you talk a little about the Green Party and running for vice-president with Ralph Nader in 1996? What was that like? What were your hopes?

WL: I'm someone who is not inclined toward electoral politics. I'm inclined much more toward grassroots community organizing and citizen activism, although I'm also someone who has pretty much employed most tactics to create political change. I don't believe in wedding yourself to a tactic. I believe in looking at where you want to go and recognizing that it is going to take a long time to get there. So, some things you do because they stall the system, some things you do because they transform the system, and some things you do because they build the alternative to the system.

I have very mixed feelings about participating in the electoral process, as a Native person. It is a foreign system to a lot of what I stand for. At the same time, having been through the U.S. court system and having been to many administrative hearing processes in this country, I'm not adverse to the idea of Native people engaging in the electoral process as a form of change.

I believe that, in its foundational, in-your-gut, ethical sense, democracy is about the need for public policy to fill the needs of the poorest people in this country, not the richest—the right for those who are the most silent to have a voice, the right for all of us to be able to participate in political discourse and dialogue. A multi-party system is about

that process.

For me, it was quite enlightening. I had a sense that the political process was exclusive, but I had no idea of how exclusive it was. For instance, in Wyoming, you had to have 10,000 people who were eligible voters who had never registered as either Republican or Democrat sign your petition in order to get on the ballot [laughs]. That makes it almost impossible!

Asking those questions about where democracy is going in the electoral process is a really important part of the process we engaged in. I believe that Ralph and I were an important part of at least broaching that dialogue.

SEP: How did you become political? How has your perspective changed over time?

WL: I come from a family that has always been politically involved and outspoken, on both sides. I was brought to demonstrations and picket lines and organizing events pretty much all the way through my early childhood into my teens. I remember the Wounded Knee takeover of 1973. I remember watching Walter Cronkite and the body counts of the Vietnam War on TV every night. I was raised in a household that believed that you needed to bear witness to injustice and that change only occurred when you struggled. I'm thankful that I had a good family upbringing.

When I began doing formal political work, I was 17. I was asked to do some research for a non-governmental organization at the United Nations called the International Indian Treaty Council on the impact of multinational corporations and natural resource exploitation on Indian communities. The research compared mining in Northern Cheyenne reservation with mining in Namibia. I researched the inequitable royalties in mineral agreements and the environmental prac-

tices and social and economic practices in Namibia and North Cheyenne. Subsequently, I moved into the issues of uranium mining on Navajo reservation.

It was a process of looking at data that had very human impacts from an academic perspective—I was an undergraduate at Harvard at the time—and recognizing that Harvard was where, in fact, much of the policy was made. I remember one study I found in 1978, by Los Alamos Scientific Lab, that said, perhaps the solution to the radon emission problem is to zone the land into uranium mining and milling districts so as to forbid human habitation. You *know* that study wasn't released on Navajo—where they had a thousand abandoned uranium mine shafts, and 44 operating uranium mines and ten uranium mills, and five coal-fired power plants and four coal strip mines!

From 1979-80, I went to work for a community organization that was trying to stop new mining and development projects on Navajo. I spent a lot of time translating government documents into plain English, which were then translated into Navajo. You know that if there's no word for "radiation" in Navajo, you can't have informed consent!

Then, I went to anti-nuclear rallies to talk to the people who were fighting nuclear power plants about where the uranium for the fuel rods came from. What I saw in that process was the diversity of grassroots resistance to the projects, the immensity of the damage that was caused, the callousness of the industries, the callousness of the shareholders, the callousness of the government—and that there were allies in the anti-nuclear movement who asked the same questions but had no idea where their electricity came from. In the early '80s, most of the uranium mining on Navajo was stopped. Nuclear power is a dying industry in this country, and that is largely because of grassroots resistance.

So, my politics were formed by that set of events. Then, I moved into South Dakota and James Bay, where my children's father is from. What I then saw, which is something that I knew on some level, was that even if you stop nuclear power in this country, until you stop the level of consumption, you would have the same problems—because industry would move someplace else, in this case, to hydroelectric dams in Canada, where they flooded huge areas of lands, impacting incredible numbers of people.

So, my analysis became (which it always was to an extent): it is *not* about not using nuclear power and going to hydroelectric power. It is about curbing your level of consumption. It is about a society that is based on energy and capital-intensive industrial models, versus labor and ecologically and culturally sound development models. It is about asking those questions about the inequality that is inherent in a society that is based on conquest, not on survival. A conquest society requires constant intervention into other people's lands, and control of other people's economies, and displacement of other communities, and the making of refugees.

SEP: What are the different social change movements you feel most allied with? What has been your experience with the various feminist, environmental, and Native organizations you've been affiliated with?

WL: Obviously, my primary work is in my own community. I direct a reservation-based organization that works on environmental and cultural issues. We try to recover our land, because nine-tenths is held by people other than us, a third of which is held by the federal, state, and county governments. I'm interested primarily in that as the underlying issue in our community. The process of recovering our land is a process of recovering our souls as Anishinabe people.

In the broader Native community, most of my experience has been with grassroots Native organizations not unlike my own project, who are working, quite often, absent the blessings of their own tribal government or the blessings of any form of government. What I learned over time is not to expect the *approved* leadership to make anything right.

I have had the honor of working with a lot of really strong people in the environmental, progressive, and women's movements. I learned a lot in my time on the board of Greenpeace, both good and bad. I learned about a lot of people with a lot of commitment and good strategies and thoughtfulness—and about how that plays out in the arena of the big ten environmental organizations. People lump them all together, but they are not monolithic.

I also learned quite well about how money dictates power, and how in international organizations, those who have the money are not those who are doing the work. I was also part of a huge political battle that ensued at Greenpeace last year, that ended with a bunch of us being forced out.

I believe that the environmental movement—although it has come from the settler culture, and from, in many cases, a middle-class, white frame of reference—is also part of how people are recovering their relationship to the earth and is central to the survival of the continent.

I don't understand all the nuances of the women's movement. But I do understand that there are feminists who want to challenge the dominant paradigm, not only of patriarchy, but of where the original wealth came from and the relationship of that wealth to other peoples and the earth. That is the only way that I think you can really get to the depth of the problem. I don't think it is about changing white women for white men at the seats of power. That doesn't qualitatively change our situation as Native people, as Third World peo-

ple. The debate about the broader issues doesn't occur in the women's movements to the extent that it should in any measure. But we're hopeful to have more of that debate.

SEP: Do you consider yourself part of the left?

WL: I'm not sure.

I gave a talk today, and this man said I was considered a radical and the conservatives would really oppose me. And I find it so ironic, because I consider myself a conservative. I think that most Native people are very conservative, and their conservatism comes from their perception that the immensity of cultural, technological, social, and ecological change that has occurred in the last 50 years is not conservative at all! It is entirely radical. It is frightening. It is way too much.

"Conservatives" have no idea of the impact of the vast number of chemicals that are out there in the world, cumulatively, on life forms. They have no idea how to fix their mess, which they made in industry. Yet they call themselves conservative. They are not conservative. That was a very unconservative set of decisions that they made.

Conservative decision-making would be like what most indigenous people say. They say when you make a decision today, consider the impact of your decision on the seventh generation from now. That is conservative decision-making. So, that is where I stand.

I find that I have more allies on the left than on the right, and that is because the left is, by and large, filled with people who are challenging the present paradigm and power structure. I'm interested in totally transforming the structure that exists now, because it is not sustainable.

The question of socialism or communism or capitalism, or between the left and right—I think the important question

is between the industrial society and the earth-based society. And I say that because I believe that capitalism and communism are really much more about how the wealth is distributed, if it trickles down or is appropriated at the beginning to those who have worked for it. But, you know, someone has to question where the wealth came from. What right does society have to the wealth? What is the relationship between that society and the land from which it got its wealth? Those are the questions that should be asked.

SEP: What achievements of grassroots activists have given you the most hope for the future?

WL: In my own community, I've seen that we've recovered 1,300 acres of land. We have restored a fair price for the wild rice that goes off our reservation now, from 50 cents a pound ten years ago to \$5 a pound now. We've restored more of our language. We had the return of one of our ceremonial drums to our reservations. All of those are really significant aspects of our cultural restoration. We unseated in 1996 a corrupt tribal government, after 20 years of struggle. Now we are struggling with a new government and what form of government we would like to have.

I've seen communities resist a development project, like James Bay II. But yet, now we have James Bay III. That is because the systemic issues have yet to be addressed: what kind of development policies does Quebec have, what is the relationship of Canada to the United States, *vis-à-vis* free trade? Those things still need to be addressed. But to have what's been called a ragtag band of activists and Indians take on one of the largest utilities in North America and have some success—that is a good thing.

SEP: What lessons do you think activists and progressives have failed to learn over the last two decades?

WL: I think that if the debate in the Sierra Club over immigration is any indicator, we have some real problems in the politics of the environmental movement. That is to say, the questions I would ask the Sierra Club—the question most Native people would ask—is who the hell are you to ask about immigration? Who gave all those white people the right to question other people's right to come here?

The second question is: most people are not coming to this country out of choice. They are coming because they are environmental or economic refugees. Who made them refugees? Your government! If you have to deal with those issues, you have to take responsibility for them, and not put the blame on someone else! That is at the core of the problem: personal responsibility. Their personal responsibility for their level of consumption for the privilege that most environmentalists have, that most white people have—white privilege.

People say, "I just want to work on my issue. Solidarity work is hard to do." Yeah! It is hard to do! But you know what? It would really help if people *would* be in solidarity with communities like ours or the Zapatistas. Because while our communities are struggling, it is *your* government that forces us to take up arms! I feel that the lessons of actually learning how to use your power—past your own backyard—need to be actualized.

Another thing is, people lose perspective. It is a cultural trait in America to think in terms of very short time periods. My advice is: learn history. Take responsibility for history. Recognize that sometimes things take a long time to change. If you look at your history in this country, you find that for most rights, people had to struggle. People in this era forget that and quite often think they are entitled, and are weary of struggling over any period of time. It takes a long time to

make change. You've got to have a 50-year or 100-year plan.

Think of not being a patriot to a flag, but being a patriot to a land. Find someplace and stay there. Progressives say, "I'm going to find myself a nice community," or, "I don't like this, this, this...." You know, *find someplace*, for crying out loud, and *stay there*. And make it the right place. Don't make it your little enclave of political correctness. That is lonely [laughs].

You've got to make that alternative. You can't just intellectualize about what the problem is. Come up with a solution. Give yourself permission to make a solution. You and I know Nike, Wal-Mart, and GE have a vision for the future and are actualizing it. We need to do the same. Many so-called progressives or leftists spend all their time criticizing. What is the solution? What is your vision? It is hard to get people to change if they can't articulate or see where we're going.

One of our people in the Native community said the difference between white people and Indians is that Indian people know they are oppressed but don't feel powerless. White people don't feel oppressed, but feel powerless. Deconstruct that disempowerment. Part of the mythology that they've been teaching you is that you have no power. Power is not about brute force and money; power is in your spirit. Power is in your soul. It is what your ancestors, your old people gave you. Power is in the earth; it is in your relationship to the earth. If you live righteously, you have power.

SEP: What differences do you see, if any, in the way younger activists are taking up the mantle?

WL: I see a cynicism about the establishment of the present progressive and environmental movement. I see a lot of young people trying to find their niche. But I also see an immense amount of love and enthusiasm. I find a lot of these

young people quite thoughtful. I do. I have a lot of hope in them.

SEP: You've been lauded not only by other progressives and activists, but also by the mainstream media. How do you feel about your own role as a leader?

WL: You know, leadership is a funny thing. I consider myself not a leader but a responsible adult. It would be irresponsible of me, as a parent of a seven-year-old and a nine-year-old, to be more concerned about how much sugar is in their breakfast cereal than I am about how much PCBs are in their tissue. That would be totally irresponsible of me. That is what I find so ironic. People want a leader, but my view is, just be responsible. We are all in this together.

To whatever extent the media covers the work that we do through me, that is important. But it isn't about me; it is about this body of work. If I can be a vehicle for augmenting the coverage on that, that is good. The danger, of course, is that they create a personality. I am a pretty mundane person, on a lot of levels. And I don't want to be a personality. I'm mostly interested in how my community views me. When I walk down that path of souls into the next world, I'd like to look at my ancestors and say, "I tried." That would be good. That is how I judge myself.

SEP: How would you describe your 100-year plan? What would your community look like?

WL: The restoration of our land, of ecologically sound practices and culturally based practices, because those two things go hand-in-hand. Restoration of language. Nix all those power lines; put in some windmills. Figure out a level of technology that is appropriate. Reconstruct the relationship with the non-Indian community that is resident on the

reservation and adjoining it. Make it a relationship that is based on equity, not inequality, which is what we have now. They don't hire us, and they benefit from us. Restore the relationships between Native peoples.

I believe in the "small is beautiful" idea, and I believe that one of the important things about Native communities is that we have been "intentional communities" for thousands of years. We need to restore rural communities the same way. People need to choose to make community, to live there. We got society, but we don't got community.

SEP: Tell me about your work now.

WL: I direct the White Earth Land Recovery Project, which is a reservation-based organization, and I direct the Honor the Earth campaign, which every other year does a tour with the Indigo Girls and on an annual basis raises money to support grassroots Native environmental projects and works around certain political initiatives. This year, we are working on the nuclear waste policy act, trying to stop the wholesale transportation of nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain, which is within half a mile of 50 million Americans. This is between 30,000 and 90,000 shipments of nuclear waste. I think that is totally disgraceful. And we're working on trying to support long-term restoration of buffalo. So ... it'll probably take us a few years ... [laughs].



MANNING MARABLE

A Humane Society Is Possible Through Struggle

MANNING MARABLE is professor of History and Political Science and the founding director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University. Born in 1950, Marable was the founding director of Colgate University's Africana and Hispanic Studies Program (1983-86). He was chair of Ohio State University's Black Studies Department (1987-89) and professor of History and Political Science at the University of Colorado at Boulder (1989-93). Marable has written more than 100 articles in publications such as *The Black Scholar*, *Race and Class*, and *Monthly Review*. He has written 12 books, including: *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (SEP, 1983), *Beyond Black and White* (Verso, 1995), *Black Liberation in Conservative America* (SEP, 1997), and *Black Leadership* (Columbia UP, 1998). His public

affairs commentary series, "Along the Color Line," is featured in more than 325 newspapers in the United States and internationally. Marable is an adviser to members of the Congressional Black Caucus and is currently a national co-chair of the Committees of Correspondence. He edits the South End Press Classics series.



SOUTH END PRESS: Could you name some specific historic projects of the left that you look to as examples?

MANNING MARABLE: In terms of radical history, the two decades that people always like to cite are the '30s and the '60s—the old left and the New Left. Within the '60s, the organizations that I feel were most significant in prefiguring what may occur in the next wave of radical activism were the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC was important because it saw itself as a non-Leninist vanguard organization. Its members called themselves "the true believers." They were willing to talk the talk and walk the walk. They were willing to go to jail for their beliefs. Their method of organizing was to go into communities and provide resources and skills to encourage and support the development of organic leaders so that gifted leaders such as Fannie Lou Hamer emerged in the process of struggle. The model that they had for intervention was very much like the one C.L.R. James, the West Indian revolutionary, suggests: the task of radical intellectuals and community organizers is not to *tell* people what to; it is to learn *from* the masses, and, utilizing our skills and ideas and resources, to help mass-based organizations fight for their own issues, for their own rights, and to generate their own organic leadership. It's not a top-

down model; it's a bottom-up model of social change. Ella Baker spoke for this strategy: you shouldn't place leaders on a pedestal. SNCC offers a model of bottom-up radical organizing that we really need to look at.

A second model is the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. This was militancy outside of the union movement but at the site of production. The League organized the most oppressed workers in the factory, who suffered from what they themselves called "niggermentation," working in the very worst parts of the auto plant. These were young brothers and sisters who organized themselves around principles of radical democracy, socialism, and Black empowerment, again from a bottom-up perspective—not looking to the electoral arena to provide the leadership for society but seizing, taking history in their own hands and really fighting the power. An excellent account of this struggle is Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin's *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, which South End Press is reissuing with a new foreword that I've written and with reflections by participants in the Detroit struggles.

I think the future of radicalism must successfully draw upon the legacies of the past and models of radical democracy that exist, even flawed models. SNCC and the League made all kinds of mistakes and errors of judgment, but, for what they tried to do, they were very important. They recognized that successful political organizing must be based around things people see every day, around issues that touch people's daily lives, like health and work, the environment and housing, and education for their children. It is around the contradictions and problems of daily life that radical intervention can really unfold.

SEP: Why don't we have a SNCC or a League now?

MM: Let's look at the reasons we don't have mass-based radical organizations. One of the chief theoreticians of the modern Civil Rights movement was Bayard Rustin, the coordinator of the 1963 March on Washington, D.C. After the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Rustin began to argue that the Civil Rights movement had to shift from direct action, non-violent civil disobedience, to activism in the electoral arena. To consolidate the gains of the movement, we had to have people in elected office. At the grassroots level, in the Black community, our description of this strategy was "a Black face in a high place." We wanted somebody in a prominent position who looked like us. In my writing, I call this "symbolic representation." The problem with symbolic representation is that it assumes a level of accountability and linkage between the representative and her or his constituency. If the connection is one of phenotype or gender, that's a very tenuous basis on which to build a movement. Simply because someone is Black or Latino or lesbian or gay or whatever does not guarantee the person's fidelity to a body of politics that empowers the particular constituency that they supposedly represent. The number of Black elected officials has risen from 100 in 1964 to more than 9,000 today. The number of African Americans who were in Congress 30 years ago was about five; today it is over 40, an 800 percent increase. But have Blacks experienced an 800 percent increase in real power? It hasn't happened. So, I think the emphasis of this liberal notion of social change by working solely within the established electoral system is just fatally flawed.

I think a second problem that has occurred is the breakdown of a liberal paradigm of social change that emerged out of the New Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society. The liberal political coalition collapsed. Part of the rea-

son it broke down is because the left no longer exists as an organized force. The left has always generated ideas that liberals have taken, moderated, and tried to apply in structures of power. But without a strong, aggressive left, liberals are left on their own. And when they're left on their own, they collapse. One recent example is the national decline of the Rainbow Coalition.

SEP: How did you come into politics?

MM: I can tell you the day I first really became political. It was April 4, 1968. I was a high school senior in Dayton, Ohio, and I wrote a newspaper column for the local Black weekly. The column was entitled "Youth Speaks Out," because I was a youth speaking out [laughs]. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, and my mother thought it was a great idea for me to get on a plane and fly to Atlanta—I'd never flown before—and cover the funeral for the local Black paper, so I did. I had an aunt who lived in Atlanta on the west side. I got up very early in the morning, by 5 a.m., I took a bus, and I got to the center of town. Somehow I found Ebenezer Baptist Church in the Black community near downtown Atlanta. I was the first person at the church—I got there about 6:30 in the morning—and I witnessed the whole funeral. There were tens of thousands of people surrounding the church by mid-morning. I walked along with the funeral procession that went to Atlanta University and Morehouse College, where King had graduated. Because I had a press pass, I was allowed into the press room, which occupied the second floor of a building that overlooked the ceremony. I was 17 years old and it had a very profound impact on me. I had witnessed history unfold, and I really wanted to become a part of making Black history move forward. So, that was really my entry into politics.

Like most of my generation coming of age in the '60s, I was involved in protest activities. When I was a freshman, I was elected chair of the newly formed Black student union at our campus. I participated in anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in graduate school, and I continued writing for student newspapers. But my second stage of becoming involved in political work really did not occur until after I had completed graduate school, in 1976. About that time, I became active in both the Black freedom movement and the largely white left. I became a member of the New American Movement (NAM) in 1977, and in 1976 I became active in the National Black Political Assembly (NBPA)—a network of community organizers, elected officials, and political activists that came from the Gary convention of March 1972—which attempted to build an independent Black political movement. I was involved in both processes, and I saw them as complementary, based on my whole approach to politics being grounded in race and class. That is, I thought there had to be independent Black political movements grounded in the Black community, fighting around the contradictions of race and fighting to empower the Black community. At the same time, I had concluded that a racial analysis by itself was insufficient in understanding the deep contradictions at the heart of a capitalist society. So, by the time I was in my mid-20s, I considered myself a socialist. But it was really only into the early '80s that I began to define myself as a Marxist.

SEP: How did you come to Marxist politics?

MM: In the period from about 1976 to 1980, I was what I called a "left nationalist." I was a Black nationalist. At the time, I understood Black nationalism to mean a politics that advocated community institution-building and the con-

struction of an independent, all-Black party or political formation. At the same time, I believed in some kind of democratic socialist transformation within U.S. society. I believed in working with progressive whites and Latinos around a socialist project. In 1979, when NAM debated whether to join the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) or not, I was on the side of joining DSOC to create the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The basic reason was that I felt that building a broader-based organization that ranged from social democracy to Marxism had a much greater likelihood of galvanizing popular support for the ideas of socialism. NAM only had 1,000 people, and it was too narrowly based ideologically. So, I became one of the vice-chairs of DSA.

It was in the early 1980s that a kind of theoretical bridge developed in my work from left nationalism to Marxism. My transitional work is a book that I wrote called *Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness, and Revolution* (Black Praxis Press, 1981), which is a collection of essays written between 1976 and 1980. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, which South End Press published in 1983, was largely written in response to the assassination of Walter Rodney, the election of Ronald Reagan, the upsurge of the second Cold War, which began as soon as Reagan became president, and the kind of political crises that were being experienced by Blacks in the United States at the time. It was between writing *Blackwater* and *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* that I recognized that a Marxist analysis of society, if approached not as a dogma but as a method of social analysis, was the best in unearthing and explaining the major contradictions of a society. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* argued that capitalism was intensifying a growing class stratification within the Black community and

had bought off a social layer, a privileged, middle-class group of African Americans, to go along with the system. So, the logic of the book really pushed me away from the political and theoretical framework of social democracy, which is what DSA largely represented. I had a number of personal friendships in DSA. I deeply respected Michael Harrington, who was the driving force in the organization, but just as strongly disagreed with his strategic view of how to achieve socialism in the United States. Michael believed that the left should be "the left of the possible" inside the Democratic Party, and that it should have a close working relationship with liberalism to keep liberalism honest. I felt that we needed an "inside-outside" approach. I wasn't a Trotskyist. I didn't take the view that if you vote for the Democrats, your soul will go to hell. But I did believe that our emphasis should be balanced between supporting progressives in the Democratic Party and trying to initiate independent political motions—and doing activism in the non-electoral arena. That perspective was never hegemonic in DSA; it never won out. So, by 1985, I ended up basically moving away from the organization—not an antagonistic break, but just a recognition that DSA's model probably would not be successful in this country in constructing a viable left alternative capable of achieving state power.

The independent Black movement also began to collapse by the early '80s because of the objective contradictions within the formations, tendencies toward vanguardism, tendencies toward political sectarianism, and other problems that plagued many left and Black groups in the '60s and the '70s. By 1983 and 1984, a new situation had begun to emerge in the United States. After several years of Reaganism, you began seeing challenges and protest to the Reagan agenda. The election of Harold Washington as the first Black mayor

of Chicago in 1983, the 1983 March on Washington, the 1984 Jesse Jackson presidential campaign, the formation of the Rainbow Coalition, the 1985 and 1986 anti-apartheid campaigns. All of these really peaked by 1988 around the Jackson campaign. Jesse received more votes that year than Walter Mondale did in 1984. It really showed that there was a strong left-of-center constituency that included Blacks, Latinos, and a substantial numbers of whites who would support a democratic and progressive alternative. The Rainbow movement was not a socialist movement, but it was a social justice movement in which many revolutionary nationalists, communists, Marxists, and democratic socialists freely participated in an unencumbered, open way. It had tremendous potential.

The major weakness of the Rainbow Coalition was its failure to consolidate a democratic, membership-based organization, with elected leadership accountable to all members. Jackson favored a charismatic, populist style of Black leadership, which inevitably destroyed his own organization after 1989.

With the disintegration of the Rainbow Coalition and the collapse of the Soviet bloc nations in 1989 and of the Soviet Union itself in 1991, both Black politics and left politics in the United States were thrown into a period of confusion and disillusionment. Some people felt that Marxism itself, as a method of social analysis, had been superseded by history, that we had reached a kind of "end of history" and "end of ideology"—that the best we could hope for was a more humane capitalism where there was at least the promise of social justice some place in the future. The best thing that sums up the whole experience to me was an essay I wrote in 1990, entitled "Socialism from Below," which was later published in my book *Speaking Truth to Power* (Westview, 1996). It was

during that time that the Black Trotskyist and political and cultural theorist C.L.R. James began to have an even greater impact on how I understood the processes of social change in society. From James, I took the idea that the road forward for the left in this country must be found in understanding and listening to the masses, listening to issues that people raise as problems of daily life, in their own circumstances, and in speaking a language that people can immediately understand—not talking down to people, but talking with them and learning from them. This was the great strength of the insight into radical democracy of people like C.L.R. James and the African revolutionary Amilcar Cabral. This was the great insight of people like Ho Chi Minh, that a politics must speak a language people understand; it must resonate with and illuminate problems and issues of daily life. To be truly radical means to get to the root of things, to the heart of things. Many of these ideas are expressed in a book I published with South End Press in 1997, *Black Liberation in Conservative America*.

During this whole period after the collapse of the Soviet model, a number of people basically gave up on socialism. I rethought the socialist project and emerged from the period thinking that socialism as a project of radical participatory democracy not only still made sense, it was the only humane future we could fight for in this country.

SEP: How would you describe the state of Black politics today? There seems to be a crisis of leadership.

MM: When the Rainbow Coalition collapsed less than a decade ago and Jesse pulled the plug on his own organization, it left a massive vacuum in Black politics. At first, it wasn't filled by anybody. And in the early 1990s, there was this whole phenomenon around Malcolm X. What that was

about was the hip-hop generation trying to articulate its rage, its alienation, its militancy, but not finding a vehicle or a personality to express themselves. So they were forced to reach back in history to resuscitate someone who had been assassinated 25 years before to articulate what they felt today. That's why "Malcolm mania" occurred. But, as the Malcolm mania died down, Louis Farrakhan, the head of the Nation of Islam, reemerged. Farrakhan astutely understood that, for the generation born after the Civil Rights movement, there was a deep degree of pessimism about the possibility that American society could in any meaningful way address issues and concerns of Black people. In some respects, the Black community was divided generationally between the "we shall overcome" generation and the hip-hop generation. For people born between the period of World War II and the early '60s—I was born in 1950, right in the heart of that—we had seen dramatic social changes occur. We had witnessed revolutions; we had supported and been in solidarity with revolutions in the Third World; we had been involved in challenging and helping to oust from office the president of the United States, challenging Vietnam policy, challenging U.S. imperialism, defending Cuba, fighting for gay and lesbian rights, women's rights, Black liberation, Latino liberation. For people born after 1965 or 1970, it was a very different kind of social outlook. The politician that they remembered best, at least during their formative years, was Ronald Reagan. They had seen affirmative action under unrelenting attack ever since the *Bakke* decision in 1978, which outlawed the use of racial quotas in admissions to professional schools. They had witnessed cutbacks in social services and social programs. They had witnessed the conservatives largely dictating the political culture and debate in the country. They had seen a Democratic president,

Bill Clinton, who pursued policies that were frequently to the right of Richard M. Nixon. So, it's not surprising that many Black young people felt that any kind of liberal or progressive possibility in the United States was null and void, and that we had to turn inward into a politics of racial separatism and racial essentialism. Farrakhan understood all of that.

When the Million Man March call occurred in 1995, Black elected officials and the existing civil rights leadership were undercut by this tremendous motion. The problem is that Farrakhan has no program to challenge racism and has no program to advance the movement. As I wrote in *Black Liberation in Conservative America*, he's essentially the late 20th-century version of Booker T. Washington. He's homophobic, he's anti-Semitic, and he's deeply conservative and patriarchal; he's opposed to women's reproductive rights; he's developed a political relationship with Lyndon LaRouche; he traveled to Nigeria and embraced the junta that executed Ken Saro-Wiwa, the writer and Ogoni activist. He represents a kind of Black authoritarianism that can't be tolerated and can't be accepted as any kind of program to advance Black issues and interests. But, as my mother always said, something always beats nothing. We have not put forward a model of political and social change to represent a viable alternative to Farrakhan among many African Americans.

SEP: What kind of response do you think is needed?

MM: To challenge the great divisions in our society, one needs specific formations that draw upon the collective memories and resistance movements of those who have been oppressed. But there is no Black strategy for health care that can be addressed solely by working within the Black community; there's no strategy in New York City for providing

decent public transportation for Latinos and Latinos alone; there's no strategy that will clean up the environment for Pacific Island Americans alone. So, we have to be aware of the power and importance of organizing not just around identity, but the materiality of daily life, which still, in many respects, is racialized for people of color. You build from that, but you have a grander social vision that transcends it and recognizes the strengths and limitations that are drawn from the particularity of identity.

At the present time, I think that what is required for the left is to overcome organizational parochialism and organizational forms that simply perpetuate divisions from an earlier period of history. There is a need for something like a secular, left-of-center, progressive version of a Christian Coalition. This would be a left-of-center, mass-based formation, not a formal political party, but a membership organization that advocates a progressive public policy agenda. Socialists and Marxists could operate freely in it, along with radical feminists and radical gay and lesbian activists. It would campaign for basic issues around public policy and programs—public education, health care, housing—that can really move the movement forward.

SEP: How do you think we can revitalize the socialist current in the left?

MM: Socialism lost its way largely when it became decoupled from the processes of democracy. My vision of a socially just society is one that is deeply democratic, that allows people's voices to be heard, where the people actually govern. C.L.R. James sometimes used the slogan "every cook can govern" to speak to the concept that there should be no hierarchies of power between those who lead and their constituencies. This idea is related to Antonio Gramsci's argument

that the goal of a revolutionary party is for every member to be an intellectual. That is, everyone has the capacity, has the ability to articulate a vision of reality and to fight for the realization of their values and their goals in the society. Gramsci is pointing toward the development of a strategy that is deeply democratic, one where we don't have elitist, vanguardist notions of what the society should look like, but have the humility and the patience to listen to and learn from working-class and poor people, who really are at the center of what any society is. We have to learn the ability to listen to people, to learn from life. In his political writings, Cabral urged his comrades to approach the art of revolution with a deep sense of humility and honesty. To paraphrase Cabral, we must tell no lies, expose lies where they are told, claim no easy victories. The process of social transformation will be a very protracted one, and, in the end, all we do is to contribute in a very small way to the realization of that broad democratic goal.

Our challenge and task is not to construct a comprehensive blueprint for an alternative society. It is to, in a small, modest way, really speak to a vision of what society might look like if we didn't have 43 million people without medical care; if you didn't have a half million people in the United States last year being turned away from an emergency health clinic because they had no health insurance; if you had a society where several million people didn't sleep in the streets or were underhoused. That's a vision that can be realized through struggle, but it must be a struggle that harnesses the capacities, the intelligence, the will, the insights from our collective experiences. That's what I mean by radical democracy. And that's why I am a socialist—because I deeply believe that an ethical and a humane society is possible through struggle.



URVASHI VAID

A Shared Politics of Social Justice

URVASHI VAID is an attorney and community organizer whose involvement in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movement spans nearly 20 years. She is the director of the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), a community-based think tank that engages in research, policy development, strategic projects, and coalition-building. She is the recipient of a Rockefeller Residential Fellowship from the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at the City University of New York for the 1997-98 academic year. Vaid is the author of *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (Anchor, 1995), which won the American Library Association's Gay and Lesbian Book Award in 1996. Vaid is a former executive director and public information director for NGLTF.

DAVID BARSAMIAN: In the wake of social activism in the late '60s and early '70s, a number of social movements developed. One of them was the gay and lesbian movement. What are its goals?

URVASHI VAID: The goals of the gay and lesbian movement are full equality and human rights for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered. That means on a legal and legislative level, equal rights in every aspect of public and private employment, housing, the whole panoply of civil rights that everybody in this country should be able to enjoy. On a more social and cultural level, I think the gay and lesbian movement fights for respect, for understanding of fundamental humanity and the legitimacy of our relationships, for the recognition that we have families as gay people that include children, parents, extended families in very many of the same ways that heterosexual people have families. There are all these other issues, extralegal issues that I feel are also very important in the gay agenda.

DB: Why do you think some people feel genuinely threatened by gays and lesbians?

UV: There are many reasons people feel threatened. I think some of it is just lack of familiarity. The gay and lesbian communities in this country have just become visible in a very short amount of time, the last few years. We're very new to most Americans. Most people still do not understand that we are a part of every family because they don't know the gay siblings, aunts, uncles, nephews, or cousins in their own families. So, they see us as the Other, still, when we are very much a part of the fabric of this country and of every country, in fact.

Another source of uneasiness is misinformation. Some of that is fostered by the opposition movement that we face right now—the extreme right and the very conservative right. Even the middle is sometimes opposed to gay and lesbian equality. They base their opposition on fundamental misunderstanding about gay and lesbian people. We are human beings. We are not evil. We are not simple. We are not unnatural. We are ordinary to the extreme, to an amazing extent, decent beings, some of whom are good, some of whom are bad. Some of us do good things and are extraordinary people and talented writers and artists. Others are hard-working machinists. The spectrum is what we represent.

But the misinformation that our opponents put out about us is very damaging. I think the anxious middle of the American electorate, the 30 to 40 percent of people who oppose discrimination but don't agree that gay people should have the right to have family or marriage, listens to this misinformation and gets swayed by it. So, I think we have to counter that misinformation by coming out in our families and our lives and our workplaces and by talking to heterosexual people in our lives about who we are, what our aspirations are. I think that does a lot to dispel the fear and anxiety that heterosexual people feel.

DB: The Christian Coalition is perhaps the most visible of the many politicized, sectarian groups now operating in the political theater. They certainly view gays and lesbians as unnatural, and they're making their views very powerfully known within their own communities and within the national Republican Party.

UV: I think the most pernicious statement that is made by the Christian Coalition and its political mouthpieces like Pat Buchanan is that the acceptance of gay and lesbian peo-

ple's existence will somehow undermine western civilization. Buchanan goes on and on about this in many of his speeches, how no society that has tolerated homosexuality has survived. It's an illogical, ahistorical, bizarre statement, and yet it gets a lot of play. People really believe it. You could make that kind of statement about any number of historical things that have happened, like, "No society has survived that tolerated slavery." Slavery was a big part of ancient Rome and Greece. Perhaps that was its downfall. And on and on.

In a sense, as a democrat with a small "d," somebody who believes in democracy and participation, I think it's a good thing that all those people are mobilized to get involved in issues that affect them. What's bad is the information they're getting about gay and lesbian people. The information the Christian Coalition gives its members is quite contradictory. It's essentially, "love the sinner, hate the sin." That is a contradictory position, because I think that gay and lesbian people are gay because sexuality is such an integral part of our lives, just in the same way that heterosexual people's sexuality is woven into their very being. You can't divorce the being from the orientation, I don't think. It's illogical to try to do that.

The energy that the Christian right expends on demonizing gay people would be so much more productive to expend on trying to solve some of the really serious problems in our society that have absolutely nothing to do with homosexuality. Gay people aren't the source of crime. We're not the cause of poverty. We're not the cause of illiteracy. We're not the source of the decay in the American family. In fact, the economic system is the source of that decline.

But we're very convenient scapegoats. We're living in a time where scapegoating of gay people, of immigrants, of

single welfare mothers, of people of color, and of the poor is on the rise. And the reason scapegoating is on the rise is that it's a wonderful subterfuge. We attack government instead of attacking big business. Big business is the reason people are losing their jobs, but we act as if it's because of government bureaucracy.

DB: A segment of the political discourse not only incorporates this hostility toward homosexuality, but also has a very well-defined view of sexuality and the role of women as homemakers, as mothers, as cultural protectors. One particularly hears that latter element in Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, for example. It's not limited to the Christian Coalition.

UV: I think central to the struggles that are going on in the public sphere right now are very different views of gender and the role of women and men. The feminist contribution to the world has been to say that, in profound ways, what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man is manufactured. It's an artificial construction. It changes from period to period in history. What's appropriate for women in one era is suddenly considered inappropriate in another era.

Some people argue with that whole premise. Opponents of that view say gender is biological. You're either a man or you're a woman. Everybody knows what it means to be a man. Everybody knows what it means to be a woman. Clearly, there are a lot of assumptions in that view. So, we're having an argument in this society, in every culture, about the role of women, the role of men, what it means, how this will affect heterosexual families, how the acceptance of non-traditional families will affect the heterosexual nuclear family.

I think we shouldn't be afraid to debate and discuss and argue. What is happening, though, is the attack against feminism by the conservative movement is very vociferous and aggressive. In some ways I think feminism is an ideology that is the antidote to conservatism. Feminism is not just about women. It's a fundamental way of approaching the issue of power in society. It's also a critique that has an economic component.

I was just thinking about how we are all searching for the ideological opposite of conservative. I wonder if we shouldn't go back to feminism and start thinking about notions of equality and power and gender and see if that helps us in answering this. Certainly, conservatives are very vocal and have targeted feminism as evil. It's very interesting, because the women's liberation movement and feminism as a political theory have contributed so much of value over the last 100 years of our lives. They have changed the status of women in dramatic ways. Feminism and the women's liberation movement have changed men's lives in profound ways. I think men have more possibilities to be nurturing, to reject these masculine stereotypes that have really chained them. We've changed the family in profound ways.

DB: The issue of white male privilege also hits very raw nerves. How do you talk to white men about this issue? How do you convince them that they benefit almost by definition because of their gender and the color of their skin?

UV: I don't know that I talk very effectively to white men about this issue. I think there is a curtain that exists between me and many men that I meet, a curtain that is not of my own creation.

DB: Because you're a woman of color?

UV: Exactly. That's one of the most frustrating aspects of racism and sexism, how we have these filters that we see each other through. In many situations, I find, even when I feel like I'm saying something that has absolutely nothing to do with race or gender, it is heard by a white man in a very personalized way—as if it did have something to do with race and gender—because, when he looks at me, he sees a woman of color. It's funny, because when I look at white guys that I know or work with, I don't see whiteness or maleness as the first thing. I sometimes see the political ideology first. Am I talking to a conservative, a liberal, a radical, a moderate? That's what I often notice first. Or I see mannerisms, warmth, those intangible qualities in a human being. Is this somebody I can actually have a conversation with? Do I have to fear this person? Is he just a jerk? There are all sorts of other things that come into it.

The question you're asking, though, is a very important one, because I think there has been a backlash among white men against the emergence of people of color movements and also the movement against sexism. For progressive people, I think we have to speak more directly to this anxiety and not get into badgering people or pointing fingers. The way I try to do it is to say, "Are we committed to a shared politics of social justice, you with your identity and me with mine?" Often the answer, when you really have time to have a dialogue, is: "Yes, we are committed to a shared vision of social justice."

I don't think you have to be a person of color to be opposed to racism. I don't think you have to be a gay person to be opposed to homophobia. I don't think you have to be a woman to understand sexism and believe in equality of men and women. We have to move away the notion that you can only speak to those issues if you are a member of those

groups. I don't believe that. I'm not a nationalist.

I think one of the failures of our identity-based movements is that we let go of the project of developing the common politics. We focused on the identity and less on the politics. I really value identity. As I've said many times, I am who I am, a lesbian. I value that. I will always be, wherever I go, an out lesbian speaking about the world and the issues from my perspective as a lesbian. And yet, I very much believe I can link up and find common ground with a heterosexual mother who lives in the suburbs. I think I can link up and find common ground with a straight white businessman who's working in a big corporation. I really believe that. Otherwise, I would be much more cynical and I would be writing nasty books about how we can't get along.

I actually really believe that there is a progressive framework that many, many people subscribe to in their hearts and that we have to articulate in public policy and push for in politics. Many people believe that the prosperity we see in this society ought to benefit all the people in some way, whether that means education that's free and affordable or whether that means health care that's free and affordable. People genuinely believe that. Lots more people believe that than believe we should turn our backs on the poor and walk away from the social problems—"I'll just get mine and forget the rest." I don't believe that's the view that people hold in their hearts. So, I guess I'm a progressive of the heart.

DB: There are criticisms of identity politics—that it contributes to balkanization, to fragmentation, to competition, and not to a unity in building bridges. What are your views on that?

UV: There are many critiques of identity politics. They come from the left and the right and from within those

identity-based movements. I don't think that identity politics contributes to the balkanization of the movement. I think the lack of a movement contributes to our powerlessness.

Within the gay and lesbian community, for example, there has been a big argument for many years. Are we just a single-issue movement? Do we care about other issues? Are we a human rights movement in the broader sense than being a gay rights movement? There is profound disagreement among us about this question. Gay progressives absolutely believe that we have to be multi-issue, that of course we fight for gay and lesbian equality as a primary purpose of our work, and we also see how the changes that we need to make to gain our equality intersect with the issues of racism and sexism and economic injustice. There are others who say: "There are no intersections. We're going after gay rights. We have to keep our focus on ourselves and just do it." For pragmatic or ideological reasons, they believe that. So, there is this whole discussion that's going on within these identity-based movements.

When I hear leftists say, "We have to move beyond identity," I hope that they know that there are these profound debates going on within these movements. Sometimes, when I hear leftists say that, it sounds just like the right wing saying, "We have to move to this universal politics," where everybody is defined in terms of the old standard of white male patriarchy. I don't think we can go back to that.

What we have to do is come together in a new way, based on understandings that we have of ourselves as white men, as women of color, as gay people, as people of color of whatever nationality. I believe it's possible now for us to come back together in new ways because we have the self-confidence and maturity to do it. Thirty years ago, there was no gay and lesbian identity. Now there is. Thirty years ago,

the idea of what it meant to be in a common movement meant something really different than it would if we were to do it today.

There's a feminist critic who has said that identity politics was a necessary mistake. I think it's a formulation I appreciate, because I think it was very essential for us to deepen our understanding of racial identities and different cultures. But for progressive people, it's a mistake to stop there. The other piece of the problem that I think comes up in this notion of "we've balkanized ourselves" is this notion that...

DB: You have contributed to your own marginalization. It's a kind of victimology.

UV: I don't buy it. It's a very convenient hook on which to pin the failure of the left, which is due to many factors other than the emergence of women and people of color. The New Left splintered because of ego problems, ego wars between its leaders, because of the systematic destruction of its leadership and its organizations by the government, and because of its inability to translate its politics into electoral activism. It fell apart because it failed to institutionalize in new ways, even though it spawned a whole bunch of institutions. It really failed to politically institutionalize itself. I think it failed because it didn't have a very clear critique of capitalism or a really clear set of institutions that it was trying to create.

I was a child in the '60s. I identify my work in the tradition of the activists of that New Left, and I appreciate very much the work that was done in the anti-war movement and the Civil Rights movement, the Black liberation movement, and the women's liberation movement of the '60s and early '70s. I came along at a later point. What I saw when I came

along was a splintered movement. I don't think the sources of that splintering had to do with the emergence of identities. In fact, they predated the emergence of the identity movement that we're talking about historically. But it's very convenient right now for leftists to come along and say, "See? It's because these women and people of color have spent the last 20 years whining about their problems that we don't have a left." In fact, the gay and lesbian liberation movement, for example, has been an incredibly active in-the-streets movement. It's been one of the few places where a movement has existed in the last 20 years. I could say the same for the women's movement, around abortion, violence against women, sexual harassment. These were primary sites of organizing and activism that have mobilized and changed the minds of thousands and millions of people. So, to dismiss these movements is the wrong approach. You're not going to be able to take advantage of the energy and the talent that's in those movements.

There is an old guard of the New Left that is still around that was profoundly threatened by the loss of its power. So all the critiques that the women's movement made about male-dominated institutions, and all the critiques that Black liberationists made about white-dominated institutions, are still relevant in many places on the left. The left remains a group of aging baby boomers who are running these institutions, many of whom are absolutely brilliant people and completely dedicated to their work. I do not intend to disrespect their enormous contribution. What I challenge is their unquestioned assumption that they've got it right and everybody else has it wrong. If your basis doesn't exist, you've got to look at what's wrong with what you're doing, no matter who you are.

I hope that what comes out of some of the writing that

I'm seeing in publications like *The Nation* and *The Progressive*, and some of the new books that are coming out, is a new call for us to come together. I think it's possible for us to come together. But it's not going to be possible for us to come together as the New Left of the '60s. We have to come together as the progressive populist movement of the 21st century, which is going to look very different than the New Left did. It's also going to look very different than our current identity-based movements look. We don't have the platform right now. We don't have the relationships with each other today. We don't have the institutions to build this new movement today. But I'm really confident that we're going to see progressives create those institutions over the coming years. We're building those relationships. For the first time in many years, I feel like there's a desire on the part of all sorts of progressive people to come together and work together.

DB: There seems to be a resurgence of patriarchy. First of all, I want to know if you agree with that assessment. And, second, why is it happening now?

UV: I can't remember the writer who said this: "For every emergence of women there is an emergency of men." I'm paraphrasing. It's a very interesting formulation. I think sexism is very real. It's institutionalized in the economic system, in our family structures, and in the way women and men still think of their own roles in the family.

When you say there's a resurgence of patriarchy, I'm not so sure I see it in the 20-year-olds. I don't know if I see it in teenagers. Of course, there is a modeling of sexist attitudes. You can see that in popular music produced by young people. But there's also a really strong challenge to that from young people. So, I think there are some generational issues

being played out. The folks who are of my parents' generation, in their 60s and 70s, have one set of views about the role of women and men. Many of them are quite progressive. The problem comes with people who are the boomers, in their 40s and 50s, which is the generation that fought the gender wars most personally in their marriages and affairs and businesses. There's a lot of feeling there and a lot of personal resistance to women's equality on the part of men. I'm generalizing grossly, but why not? Everybody does. On the part of women, there's been some real personal pain in that generation.

Then you come to my generation. I'm 38. I'm kind of a boomer, but I'm not. In my generation, there's a different understanding of gender roles and sexism. I'm not sure if patriarchy—the system of male domination, if you define patriarchy as that—ever went away. It is being challenged, globally challenged. I was at the international conference in Beijing. Women all over the world are pushing up against patriarchy and trying to transform it into something that respects women and men in a whole different way than male domination does. They're challenging violence against women. They're challenging the unequal pay that women get for the same jobs. They're challenging all these restrictive laws and government control of reproduction. There's a profound challenge to patriarchy underway. That is causing tremendous uneasiness in this country and in many countries in the world. There is a resistance to that challenge, a backlash to that challenge.

But you know what? I know women are not going to stop. There's a determination among all women to improve our lives and the lives of young girls and women coming after us. So, the fight against sexism isn't won. It changes generation to generation. It will get rolled back, but I don't

think the Phyllis Schlaflys of the world are going to be able to stop it. In fact, they benefit from it. Phyllis Schlafly is a strong woman leader whose authority in her movement is made possible by feminism, the very feminism that she attacks.

Social change happens both incrementally and in flashes of illumination. In terms of changing institutions, it's very incremental. For many years, I thought that we would have a revolution that would overthrow existing structures and replace them with the new thing. I don't believe that now, and I haven't believed that for a long time, if I'm honest with myself. I do believe that social change is necessary because we live in an economic and political system that is increasingly repressive, that hurts people more than it benefits people, that benefits too few people at the expense of too many, and we've got to change that. It's hurting working people. It's hurting the majority of people in this country. So, something's got to change.

As a progressive, rather than a reactionary, I believe that the way we make that social change is that we have to imagine a socially responsible capitalism. Okay, I'll put it out there. I don't believe we are going to overthrow capitalism. People will disagree with me.

But I really believe that we can make capitalism more responsive, accountable, environmentally sound. We can make it fairer, non-discriminatory. We can take the benefits of this economic system and spread them out, so they can benefit more people rather than the five owners of everything. We can work to make the places where people work humane environments that meet the needs of working people, whether it's day care or health care or Medicare or Social Security. We can create systems. We can do that by spreading the prosperity to raise up the standard of living of all the

people without overthrowing capitalism. We can do that by working to make it socially responsible. This is a pragmatic formulation.

Progressivism is a spectrum; it's not an ideology following one leader saying one thing. It's many people who have very wildly diverging opinions about many things. But, as progressives, if we could commit to a general frame of reference that we are about improving the quality of life for a lot more people, we're about helping working and middle-class people, and we're about taking care of poor people, we could really make some inroads in political power in this country. But, if we choose to be purists, if we choose to be arguing for a consensus we will never reach, for agreement on every point, it's never going to happen. We've got to negotiate a new tract with each other as progressive people. I think we are very serious about what we believe in, but are we serious that we can govern, that we can lead people, that we have a vision that people should follow?

I think we have great visions. We have great answers to the problems that face this country in every single area. Great answers for the problems in education and crime and poverty and welfare. But we've got to talk about those things. We need a movement that pulls us all together but unifies us to push for those agreed-upon visions. We can't spend our time waiting for The Perfect Vision, The One and Only Answer, The Charismatic Leader Who Will Lead Us Into Salvation. It's nirvana. It ain't gonna happen.

We've got to work with what we're facing right now, which is a time of enormous economic anxiety, which is being manipulated to scapegoat individuals or groups for problems that they have absolutely nothing to do with creating. Immigrants aren't responsible for the lack of jobs in this country. The movement of multinational capital to other

places is. Gay people are not responsible for the decline of family. The changing roles of women and men, the dislocation caused by economic forces where people have to move and families are split, and all that stuff is responsible. Let's talk about the real sources of those problems and put out our answers, our suggestions. Then, you know what? We'll suddenly find ourselves having a lot of people who will say, "Yes, I'm a progressive."

DB: How does social change happen?

UV: This is my incremental theory of social change. The epiphany moment is just as important, though. Social change also happens through illuminating personal experiences. If you experience discrimination of any kind, whether you're a man, a woman, a young person, whatever the source of discrimination is, you are absolutely going to be transformed through that experience. That's what I mean by those personal moments. Anybody who has walked a picket line, who has been out on strike, is transformed by that experience. Somebody who organizes their community to deal with environmental pollution in their neighborhood is transformed by the process of organizing. Many times, in my experience, people are moved to have faith in the possibility of social change by these moments.

I'll give you another example of that personal moment. When gay people come out to their families, it's that kind of moment of change. It's a moment of change inside of us. You have to go through a lot to get to the point where you say, "I'm gay." Even today, many people have to go through a lot of self-affirmation because society doesn't provide that kind of automatic affirmation. So, you have to come to a sense of self and self-esteem in a whole different way when you're a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered person.

When I talked with my parents about being gay, it changed them. It changed our dynamics. It changed the whole understanding my family had about homosexuality. It suddenly got personal. It didn't make my parents or my family gay activists from day one. I wouldn't say even today, after many years of my work in the movement, that they're on the front line, but I do believe that they're absolutely supportive of non-discrimination, of equality. They will not stand for anybody who says that their daughter is less than a heterosexual, less human, evil, sinful, immoral. They don't believe that. That's really great change.

HOWARD ZINN

A New Great Movement

HOWARD ZINN is one of the great voices of the American left. A highly respected labor historian, civil rights advocate, and anti-war activist, he is the author of numerous books, including *The American People's History of the United States* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1995) and a postscript to the *New York Times* (1997) and a *New York Times* (1997). The *Zinn Project* (New York, 1997) collects much of his writing over the decades for publication such as *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *2 Magazine*.

Zinn grew up in Brooklyn and was a physical teacher and an Air Force bombardier in World War II before earning his Ph.D. at Columbia University. He went on to become chair of the History Department at Springfield College in Atlanta, where he became involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Later, he was a professor at



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HOWARD ZINN is emeritus professor of Political Science at Boston University. A highly respected labor historian, civil rights advocate, and anti-war agitator, he is the author of numerous books, including the seminal *A People's History of the United States* (HarperPerennial Library, 1995) and a political memoir, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* (Beacon, 1995). *The Zinn Reader* (Seven Stories, 1997) collects much of his writing over the decades for publications such as *The Nation*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *Z Magazine*.

Zinn grew up in Brooklyn and was a shipyard worker and an Air Force bombardier in World War II before earning his Ph.D. at Columbia University. He went on to become chair of the History Department at Spelman College in Atlanta, where he became involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Later, he was instrumental in

galvanizing opposition to the Vietnam War. Zinn travels frequently to speak at college campuses and community events nationwide. Called "a people-loving 'troublemaker'" by former student Alice Walker, Zinn has been instrumental in inspiring generations of thinkers and activists through his commitment to social change.

SOUTH END PRESS: You have worked tirelessly to reverse the erasure of labor history in the United States. What lessons of previous labor struggles do you believe have been most valuable for activists today? For example, the UPS strike was very successful in winning the support of the public—why?

HOWARD ZINN: Probably the most important lesson of labor struggles in American history is that they took place—that the traditional notion that the United States has lacked the class conflict that we associate with other countries is false. Indeed, there is probably no other country with a history of dramatic and violent labor struggles comparable to ours.

Another lesson is that these struggles, even when they were lost—and most strikes are lost—all advanced the cause of working people. The 1886 strike at International Harvester in Chicago led to the Haymarket Affair, the execution of four anarchist leaders, and a momentary suppression of the radical movement. But 25,000 people marched at the funeral of the Haymarket Martyrs. And countless people—Emma Goldman among them—were aroused by that to become labor leaders and radicals. The Colorado Strike of 1913-14 was lost, but the events of that strike, culminating in the Ludlow Massacre, had a profound effect on generations of people, including me, a young historian learning about it for the first time.

The lessons of the labor movement are too many to enumerate. One is that, while differences of race and nationality and gender have often kept workers divided, the fundamentally common interest of workers has often been able to override that, showing that the race-nation-gender differences are superficial, the class solidarity basic. In the Lawrence textile strike of 1912, a dozen different immigrant groups joined to strike, and to win. In the '30s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, breaking away from the racism and exclusivism of the American Federation of Labor brought Blacks and whites, men and women, together in the organization of the mass-production industries.

The UPS strike was successful in winning public support, I think, because of an awareness of low-paid, easy-to-lay-off workers, people you saw frequently on every street, plus growing consciousness of the new power of merged mega-corporations. In short, a public facing its own economic insecurity these days could identify with the UPS workers. Also, there was the show of solidarity, support of other unions, that inspired respect.

SEP: You have also made invaluable contributions in documenting the struggle for civil rights. In what ways has the debate around race changed since the '60s, and how can we begin to address these new developments?

HZ: The backlash against affirmative action can easily make us forget that not long ago the issue was racial segregation, and that we have gone beyond that. Indeed, backlashes are proof that we have made the kind of progress that angers the keepers of the status quo. The persistence of racism—hardly a surprise, considering the deep history of slavery and segregation—should not make us forget that we have come a way since the '50s, that, among both Blacks and

whites, there is a consciousness about racism that did not exist before. What we have not yet begun to address in a serious way—with a national movement of Black and white—is an issue that takes us beyond affirmative action, an issue, which, if dealt with, would make affirmative action less necessary, and that is the distribution of wealth, the economic system. In other words, we need to make such fundamental changes in our economic arrangements that Blacks and whites, and men and women, would not have to compete for resources (jobs, college positions) made scarce by capitalism.

We are wealthy enough for full employment and free education, as well as free medical care, for everyone. Important Black leaders in modern history have recognized that racism—while it has a vicious independent momentum of its own—is heavily dependent on economic hierarchy. E. Franklin Frazier, writing a report for New York City on the Harlem Riot of 1935, insisted that its roots were in job discrimination against Blacks. A. Philip Randolph threatened FDR with Black non-cooperation in World War II unless fair employment practices were instituted. Randolph, after the great Washington March for Civil Rights in 1963, told an AFL-CIO convention that the march was just a beginning, that Blacks and whites both would have to march for economic justice. And Martin Luther King, Jr., in his last years, recognized that the new field of struggle for Black people was against poverty.

SEP: You have written several plays, one of which, *Emma*, was included in the South End Press anthology *Playbook*. What were you hoping to communicate through the medium of theater? How do you think the climate for political art and culture has changed? For example, do you believe the awarding of the 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature to satirist Dario Fo might affect opportunities for political theater?

HZ: I think of art as having a double function, of giving pleasure and enhancing social consciousness. To accomplish the first alone is not something to be scorned (Stalinism would not allow it), because we should always be acting out those delights of the good life—humor, music, poetry, excitement, adventure—that we hope will be available to large numbers of people in the world when freed from sickness, war, and suffocating work conditions. To do the second without the first is to diminish art, to bring it down to the level of a political pamphlet, even granting we need political pamphlets. Art that is both artful and consciousness-awakening is a wonderful thing to engage in. Dario Fo is a good example. Of course, there are many others, in all the arts.

Having written books and articles, and recognizing the value of that, but also wanting to go beyond that—to add the element of emotion that is indispensable to art (though prose at its best can do that, too)—I finally found the time when our all-consuming involvement in the movement against the war was over in 1975 and we had some breathing space. I was happy with my play on Emma Goldman, my first play, because I thought it met those two criteria—aesthetic and social. I was lucky, too, that it came into the hands of an ingenious, uniquely gifted director (Maxine Klein) and a brilliant cast (the Next Move company of Boston) and became the longest-running play in Boston in 1977. It had its first production in New York, directed by my son, Jeff Zinn, an actor and director, then played again in New York, then in London, and at the Edinburgh Festival, was translated into Japanese, and played in Tokyo and other Japanese cities.

The climate for political art is always fraught with obstacles: the market, political timidity, often taking the form of scorn at overtly political theater. Look at Tom Stoppard's *The Right Thing* to see his haughtiness on this question. But there

always have been, are now, and always will be, audiences eager for political theater, once playwrights and theater groups have the courage and persistence to make their way through the obstacles. The Works Project Administration theater, which could be easily put down as "polemical theater" (and, granted, there is such a thing as unaesthetic, dull, polemical theater) but was not that, found audiences of millions once it charged prices anyone could afford and reached out to people who had never been to a theater. The San Francisco Mime Troupe has reached huge numbers of people.

People on the left are often too timid about producing art that is boldly political. It doesn't matter how bold the theme is, if it is artfully done—with humor, music, dramatic tension, inspiration—it will find audiences. I think people exaggerate the differences between one era and another—not in what is on the surface of an era, because the surfaces change all the time—but on the question of what is beneath the surface. Through all the apparent changes, I think there is a persistent, basic receptivity to art that moves people and that tells them something they instinctively know is right because it conforms to their own experience.

SEP: As a lifelong educator, you have devoted endless energy and time to working with young people across the country. What differences do you see in the way the next generation is taking up the mantle?

HZ: You hear over and over again, from teachers and others, that students of the current generation are simply not as interested in world affairs as were those of the '60s. That has not been my experience, teaching about 1,000 students a year through the Reagan years. It should be considered that students today have much more economic pressure on them. A college degree, especially in the arts and humanities, does

not guarantee a job, and huge tuition payments make them feel they cannot take time out for anything but to fulfill their parents' ambitions. Further, since the end of the Vietnam War, there has been no overwhelming central issue around which to mobilize students. Where issues have come to the fore, as in the movement to divest university funds from South Africa, or to protest U.S. intervention in Central America, protests took place on hundreds of campuses. During the Gulf War, there were rallies and protests on campuses all over the country. I have no doubt that if some urgent national issue developed to provoke students to action, we would once more have nationwide student activity. My students, throughout the '80s, showed an intense interest in social issues—militarism, South Africa, racial equality, class injustice, feminist issues—even if they could find no easy way to express that.

I believe that students are fundamentally idealistic, wanting to do something important in life beyond "success," but need the right circumstances, the right openings. I think we are always a short step away from a new student movement, however bleak things may look at any moment.

SEP: As workers across the country find themselves downsized or made temporary, what hope do you see for mobilizing their anger and frustration toward progressive change?

HZ: The potential for mobilizing class anger, among white people, people of color, recent immigrants, is great. But it will take a huge amount of organizing. There are hopeful signs of new energy in the labor movement today: a desire to organize the unorganized, a new militancy, a recognition that white-collar and service workers need to be organized. If there is to be a new great movement in this

country, I believe it will be around class issues, uniting workers and community people across racial and gender lines—but it is a huge job.

SEP: In what ways can we find common ground with people who have not aligned themselves with the left, or should this even be a priority?

HZ: That common ground can be found in the common sense understanding among most Americans that wealth has accumulated at the top to an obscene degree, that there is a shameful discrepancy between the size of the gross national product and the conditions of at least half the population, that tax breaks go to the rich and not the poor and middle class, that this country is rich enough to guarantee everyone health care, decent housing, a good education, adequately paid work, despite all the nonsensical talk about the evils of “big government.” It takes only a few moments to get the agreement of people you talk with that big government can be corrupt and it can be tremendously useful (Social Security, Medicare, the GI bill), and that it is even more likely that big business will be corrupt than that it will be useful. Clearly, a great deal of education and organizing needs to be done, but people are inches away from understanding what is wrong and acting on that.

SEP: What value do you see in efforts toward political reform? What do you believe is necessary to inspire efforts toward more radical—revolutionary—change?

HZ: If by political reform you mean legislation on campaign reform, or such things, I see little value in it. So long as the society is dominated by wealth, wealth will dominate politics. When grassroots action in the workplace brings about a readjustment of power, new political movements can

arise to challenge the dominance of the two major parties.

SEP: You have observed that many small struggles take place nationwide that never receive any coverage in the mainstream media. In what ways have the conditions and challenges changed for those involved in alternative and activist media? How do you think new technology has helped or hindered the flow of information?

HZ: That is certainly true about the lack of information about local struggles all over the country. I am constantly amazed, as I go around the country, how much is going on that I never knew about and that no one outside of that locality knows about. I recall being in Olympia, Washington, recently, and learning that during the Gulf War thousands of Olympia residents marched on and occupied the state capitol. It was unreported in the national media, as many Gulf War protests were. I go to Duluth, Minnesota, and there are 12 organizations with tables in the back of the hall, with literature and plans for action. Who in the country has any idea what is going on in Duluth, Minnesota? I am in Tallahassee, Florida, and students and community people are mobilizing to support a farmworkers' organizing drive in a nearby mushroom plant that employs immigrant workers under horrible conditions. In Santa Cruz, I find a group of young people, known as RASCALS, who are loaded with energy and distributing educational material to high school students, with names of periodicals and books they should read and addresses of organizations they might join.

Sure, technology is always in danger of being taken over and used for bad purposes, but we should make the best use of it we can, because it gives us great opportunities to communicate across the nation, indeed around the world, instantly. For instance, since I started using e-mail, I receive

regular dispatches from the Chiapas rebels in Mexico. When Mumia Abu-Jamal was scheduled to be executed in August 1996, there was a flurry of e-mail messages around the country mobilizing protest, and I believe that was a factor in the surprising decision of the original vicious judge to grant more time for the defense. After the Citizens Alliance was formed at its founding convention in Texas two years ago—Ronnie Dugger was the provocateur, hoping to start a new populist movement against corporate power—every day my e-mail carries news of the activities of the 50 or 60 alliance chapters around the country. With the United States preparing to bomb Iraq in February 1998, e-mail messages came from the United States and Canada spreading information and discussing protests taking place.

SEP: What impact do you think third parties have had on electoral politics, both local and national, from Ross Perot to Ralph Nader? What will be necessary for a party like the Labor Party or the New Party to succeed in advancing progressive candidates?

HZ: The technical obstacles are huge, because the state legislatures have created formidable obstacles to the organization of third parties and the placing of candidates on the ballot.

By getting almost 20 percent of the popular vote, Ross Perot showed that there is a great hunger in the population for a political alternative—in his case, almost any political alternative. The problem for a progressive third party movement is to make up for Perot's billions of dollars with millions of workers and supporters, getting initiatives on state ballots to change the rules and running candidates wherever possible. I think all third-party initiatives should be supported, although I hope they will soon join their efforts so that energy

is not divided among a Green Party, a New Party, a Labor Party, and others.

SEP: You have been active in protesting the death penalty, which was only barely prevented from passing in Massachusetts. What political use do you see being made of the death penalty, and what different tactics might activists use to fight against increasingly harsh forms of punishment, such as exploitative prison labor and mandatory maximum sentences?

HZ: What is most needed is education. The public has heard only from politicians trumpeting their concern with the protection of citizens against crime, and the media sheepishly go along, uncritically. So, every possible mode of communication—community radio stations, alternative newspapers, teach-ins—should be utilized. It takes only a bit of discussion to get people to agree that prisons do not get at the root causes of crime, that poverty and desperate living conditions breed crime faster than the judicial system can deal with; and when you bring in the issue of corporate crime and the hypocrisy of allowing that and punishing petty thieves and drug users, the common sense of that argument is readily apparent. When people learn that more money is spent on prisons than on education, that you could send a prisoner to Harvard for less money than it takes to incarcerate him or her, there is surprise, then understanding. An educational job must be done to inform people how many non-violent offenders are in prison and to destroy the popular stereotype, reinforced by the media, that people in prison are overwhelmingly violent, incorrigible offenders.

SEP: What are some promising areas in which alternative institutions have been created and have thrived? What areas remain to be explored?

HZ: I think of community health clinics created by cooperatives of doctors and nurses, of alternative schools, of farming cooperatives, and consumer cooperatives. We obviously have a long way to go to create alternative economic institutions; but, if there is to be radical change in our system, it will have to be accompanied by the establishment of alternative institutions in every part of our lives.

SEP: What goals do you believe we will accomplish in the near future?

HZ: I don't know. The success or failure of what we strive for can never be predicted. The only thing that can be predicted is that if we don't try to do something about economic injustice, race and gender discrimination, nothing good will happen.

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