

# A Step into America

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IN JUNE 1966, protesting the shooting of James Meredith, the solo freedom marcher, Peggy Terry was among the crowds in Greenwood Mississippi who, in response to Stokely Carmichael's question "What do you want?," had roared "Black Power! Black Power!" While others were bewildered, Terry recalls "there was never any rift in my mind or my heart. I just felt Black people were doing what they should be doing. We reached a period in the civil rights movement when Black people felt they weren't being given the respect they should have, and I agreed. White liberals ran everything." The message for white activists, whom the Student Non-Coordinating Committee now moved to expel from its ranks, "organize your own," was one that Terry took home with her to uptown Chicago.

Uptown, in "Hillbilly Harlem," Terry was to become a lead organizer in JOIN (Jobs or Income Now). Sending student volunteers, some bewildered as in Mississippi, back to their campuses, Terry appropriated this early store-front initiative of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) as an opportunity "to turn to our own people, poor working-class whites, for direction, support and inspiration, to organize our own identity, our own interests."

In recounting the story of Peggy Terry, and of other community activists, who while they may have gone through the schooling of the SDS, typically shared her blue-collar background and commitment, *Hillbilly Nationalists* follows in a line of revisionist accounts challenging campus-centered narratives of Sixties radicalism. While college activists were taking to the streets to protest the war in Vietnam, poor and working class radicals inspired not only, like Terry, by the civil rights movement and by the Black Panthers, but also by the revolutionary polemics that characterized the last fractious years of the SDS, were engaging in neighborhood organizing struggles against inequality, racism and police brutality.

To appreciate their achievement, it is perhaps enough to acknowledge that Amy Sonnie and James Tracy piece together a story scarcely registered in the national media archives. Frustratingly, however, their narrative offers us little insight into the tensions that, by their own account, exhausted these store-front initiatives. We have too little of the internal debate to understand how the collectives sought to relate the improvements in government services to which their organizing efforts committed them locally — getting the sanitation department to extend pick-ups, ensuring welfare checks arrive on time, cutting red tape at the unemployment center — to their radical ambition to subvert and transform government nationally.

Organizers, we are told, "grappled with the limits of neighborhood politics." Even "in cities as large and influential as New York, Chicago and Philadelphia," it was "difficult to translate local reforms to more than citywide importance." Yet "frustration with the slow progress of neighborhood organizing" had been a fate foretold. It had been well rehearsed within the SDS, and had developed as a caustic appraisal of the man in whose shadow the JOINers began knocking on doors in Chicago, the "father of community organizing" Saul Alinsky.

## Organize Your Own

Susie stood on the balcony of the Union and looked out on a sea of cheering bodies. A twenty-foot banner proclaimed, "Happiness Is Student Power." The Rolling Stones sang from speakers, "Time is on my side, yes it is!" . . . Jeff said over the microphone: "We're giving notice today, all of us, that we reject the notion that we should be patient and

work for gradual change. That's the old way. We don't need the Old Left. We don't need their ideology or the working class, those mythical masses who are supposed to rise up and break their chains. The working class in this country is moving to the right. Students are going to be the revolutionary force in this country. Students are going to make the revolution because we have the will.

This was not everyone's recollection of politics on the Berkeley campus in the late 1960s, yet the picture drawn by Sara Davidson and her friends (*Loose Change: Three Women of the Sixties*, 1977) remains a familiar one. No longer able to hitch a ride on the freedom struggle of African-Americans, and frustrated in their protests against the escalation in Vietnam, those who had made student radicalism their game appeared to withdraw from wider social engagement and to content themselves with the theatrics of "movement."

The view from the Union balcony is challenged by those who have been rewriting the history of the Sixties as the ethos of the SDS might itself have suggested, "from the bottom up." Rick Perlstein notes that re-examining the New Left and the student movement from the experience of rank and filers rather than of the leaders ("typically refugees from either suburban ticky-tacky torpor or Old Communist Left families") uncovers the creative, and indeed pioneering, role of "working-class folk," of those who, save as "Joe Sixpack, the Movement's archetypal proletarian spoiler," had scarcely a walk-on part in the existing historiography/hagiography.[1]

In this it was the Ohio National Guard that brought the Sixties to the blue-collar belt. But if student protest against extension of the war to Cambodia was to elicit a deadly response, Todd Gitlin argues in *The Sixties* (1987) it was not fortuitous that it should have happened at Kent State, this "heartland school," "the very type of campus where Richard Nixon's 'silent majority' was supposed to be training." In *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement at American State Universities in the Vietnam Era* (1995), Ken Heineman recalls that Kent Staters had been protesting for the right to organize on campus a full year before the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley supposedly gave birth to white student activism, and that the Ohio school's first anti-war group was also a year ahead of the west-coast campus.

Active at the beginning of the free-speech and anti-war movements, first generation college students were also there at the parting of the ways in '68-'69 as the SDS debated and divided over the path to be taken in the wake of the assassinations and the failure to turn the Democratic Party against the war. There were Kent Staters, with the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) majority in the SDS national office, in the decision to effectively dissolve the organization ("marches and protests won't do it") in favor of a "white fighting force" that, in alliance with "the Black Liberation Movement," would "bring the war home."

Renouncing most of the Left and splitting into small cells, the Weather Underground followed its own tragic trajectory. However, a number of those taken up with the first heady intoxication with "armed struggle," such as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz who found that she had to "drive the working rural Okie girl [in her] underground in order to be accepted by the Movement," and Steve Tappis, a non-college SDSer (he attended the New School in a later life) from blue-collar Brooklyn, sought to advance the RYM vision along what they may have imagined was a parallel path. Taking a "step into America," they become part of Sonnie and Tracy's story of JOIN and its successors the Young Patriots and Rising Up Angry in Chicago, of White Lightening in the Bronx, and of the October 4th Organization in Philadelphia.

### **The New Store-Front Left**

"TAKE A STEP INTO AMERICA," an immodest proposal by JOIN organizers, urged the Left to make itself relevant to the everyday needs of everyday people. No matter how un-revolutionary it might seem to clean up garbage or address the need for health care, as issues around which working-class people would begin to organize, they were not trivial. "Let's get it straight: all of us understand U.S. imperialism and we hate it. Those of us who didn't learn about it while sitting on the terrace at Berkeley . . . learned about it because we were organized."

JOIN, in 1963, had been one of the first initiatives of the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), conceived by SDS President Tom Hayden as a response to the gathering danger, as integration proceeded, of a white backlash. An alternative to "fascism," SDS organizers would strive to unite Black, Brown, and White workers around a common program for economic change. Within two years, JOIN's mother program was abandoned.

The potential pro-active community organizing, according to Hayden, was doomed by the war: "Once again the government met an internal crisis by starting an external crisis." With the rapid escalation of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, SDS activists heeded the call of the anti-war movement, returning in many cases to the college towns from which ERAP had provided uncomfortable exile, to play a defining role in mass mobilizations and campus actions.

Others, "more blunt," judged ERAP a failure. After two years, certainly, there was little sign of an interracial movement that could end "exploitation and imperialism, collectivize economic decision making and democratize and decentralize every economic, political, and social institution in America." (Hayden's successor, Paul Potter was blunter still. The emphasis on "the problems of the dispossessed" had been a mistake. "It is through the experience of the middle class and the anesthetic of bureaucracy and mass society that the vision and program of participatory democracy will come—if it is to come.")

But in Uptown Chicago rent strikes, health and legal clinics, occupations and street protest appear to have developed a momentum and direction of their own. It was community mobilization with a potential intuitively grasped by Dunbar-Ortiz, who was to draw on the JOIN experience for her own organizing efforts in New Orleans, and by Terry (the first person Dunbar-Ortiz had met in "the Movement" from "a rural poor white background" like her own) who, with other neighborhood members, decided to take JOIN's step into America one step further.

In Uptown, SDS organizers may have believed that, finally, they were challenging their movement's estimate of the readiness of poor whites for radicalism, but mounting tensions within the local organization suggested that some may have forgotten "one of the main tenets of participatory democracy: the outside organizer should be 'a catalyst not a leader.'" In January 1968, shortly after the publication of the "Take A Step," Terry and other local members asked the SDS students to leave. In a blistering critique of the SDS at its national convention, she announced that she and her neighbors would be relying on themselves, working only with those outsiders willing to live as part of the community, and "the working class," for the long haul.

In the event, as a "Community Union," JOIN did not long survive the break with the SDS. The changes JOIN had helped trigger Uptown, apparently generated their own tensions, not least over gender, regarded by many women student organizers as having been "as much an issue as class in the split."

This is a subject on which we would have wished Sonnie and Tracy offered us a great deal more. From Sara Evans (*Personal Politics: The Roots of the Women's Liberation Movement and the New Left*, 1980) we have the suggestion that such tensions were rooted in the original emphasis on unemployed youth. Disregarding the mother on welfare, who "is not considered, and does not

consider herself, unemployed," project workers had gone door to door looking for men. When confronted with the reality of a war-heated economy, in which "the only men left to organize were very unstable and unskilled, winos, and street youth," JOIN gave way to "GROIN (garbage removal or income now—the 'nitty-gritty' issues of daily life in the ghetto)." Springing "in cultural terms . . . from the women's sphere of home and community life, "issues such as day care, schools, street lighting, housing, and welfare," disconcerted and challenged a predominantly male leadership.

Yet the activist spirit of JOIN lived on. Experience gained on its Welfare Recipients Demand Action committee contributed both to the creation of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, one of the oldest feminist organizations in the country, and, after a series of joint actions with welfare organizations in other states, to the building the National Welfare Rights Organization.

Locally, however, JOIN's immediate successor and, viewed from the social and cultural distance of the Berkeley Student Union, its most startling, was the Young Patriots Organization—among its early leaders, Terry's son, Doug "Youngblood" Blakey. Inspired by his experience of the Poor People's Campaign summer encampment on the Washington Mall, "Resurrection City," Youngblood argued that the student movement had got too far ahead of the people: "Because I have faith in people I am willing to walk, work, sleep, fight, and even die at the pace they set."

Encouraged by JOIN in their protests against police brutality, the "Youngbloods" sought to create an organization that could build on both class and ethnic solidarity—"We are the living reminder that when they threw out their white trash, they didn't burn it"—to push forward a range of social and political initiatives in cross-community coalitions. In their trade-mark denims emblazoned with the Confederate flag (adopted as a "symbol of Southern poor people's revolt against the owning class" as well as "a blatant middle finger raised to the Student Left"), the Young Patriots paraded with the Chicago Black Panthers (from whose Ten Point Program for full employment, decent housing, prisoner's rights, and an end to racism, they fashioned their own) and, from the neighboring Puerto-Rican communities, with the Young Lords Organization. Their pride, and longest-term commitment, was a community health care campaign, including a shop-front clinic, one of several across the city sustained by this "original Rainbow Coalition."

In Chicago the efforts of the YPO were complemented and broadened by another organization to which JOIN alum had gravitated, Rising Up Angry—among its leading lights, RYM veteran Steve Tappis. More conscious than the Patriots in positioning itself ideologically within the Left (its core members were asked to become "full-time revolutionaries") the city-wide collective was nonetheless cautious in raising an ideological bar to participation. Thus support for "our boys in Nam" did not exclude residents from neighborhood organization. Angry appreciated that the relationship of neighborhood youth and their families to the military could never be as simple as that of upward-bound college kids. Such concessions, however, did not detract from the conviction that "hassled by the pigs, fucked by bosses, channelled into bullshit jobs, drafted into the Army, lied to by politicians, and ripped off by the stores and businesses," white urban youth, and not least the gang affiliated, could join the vanguard of the revolution.

In other cities, independent initiatives drew, and expanded, on the Chicago experience. In the Bronx, the radical fuse for community organization was White Lightning, a group that had initially formed around ex-drug addicts who bought into the Panther theory of a drug-pushing police and intelligence agency conspiracy. In districts of Philadelphia where machine shops and factories sat interspersed between narrow row homes, the October 4th Organization (O4O) uniquely organized both workplace and neighborhood. In each case, "providing community services and organizing against racist policy, the 'war on the poor,' and the seemingly endless war in Vietnam" sustained and developed a "small but notable cadre of white radicals."

## "A Better Ghetto"

THOSE WHO ESTABLISHED JOIN's first store-front presence recognized that their "Step into America" had been taken by an earlier generation of radicals. Having opened shop, they crossed town to meet Saul Alinsky.

The JOINers would have been wary of the man described by William F. Buckley as "the pet revolutionary of the church people of America." But Buckley (who might not have been surprised to learn that Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* is today a Tea Party primer) was not alone in regarding Alinsky (1909-1971) as "something close to an organizing genius."

A veteran of numerous labor organizing drives across the country in the Thirties —repudiating "all dogma," but working with Communists at a time when, in his opinion, they were doing "a hell of a lot of good work in the vanguard of the labor movement and . . . in aiding blacks and Okies and Southern sharecroppers" — Alinsky had been drawn to community organizing in Chicago through his sociological study of gangs. Initially, it was to the Back-of-the-Yards (Upton Sinclair's *Jungle*). Here, with the help of the Chicago archdiocese, Alinsky succeeded in rallying a mix of otherwise mutually hostile Catholic ethnics (Irish, Poles, Lithuanians, Croats . . .) to demand, and win, concessions from local meatpackers, landlords and city hall.

The JOIN activists were to meet Alinsky as the founder/leading light of the Woodlawn Association. Through the association (comprising block clubs, local businesses, and churches), black residents on the South Side had taken on the redevelopment plans of the University of Chicago in the 1950s. Alinsky claimed Woodlawn was the first community group not only to plan its own urban renewal but, even more important, to control the letting of contracts to building contractors. With the hiring of blacks a condition, Alinsky found it "touching to see how competing contractors suddenly discovered the principles of brotherhood and racial equality." Similar "conversions" were secured from employers with threats of mass shop-ins at city department stores, and of a "piss-in" at Chicago O'Hare. Sonnie and Tracy record the "intergenerational confab" with Alinsky as "a disaster."

As his *Rules for Radicals* (1971) is an address to their generation, we can imagine Alinsky's take on the new Uptown organizers. Alinsky was more than willing to concede that the "liberal cliché about reconciliation of opposing forces is a load of crap." "Reconciliation means just one thing: when one side gets enough power, then the other side gets reconciled to it." But opposition to consensus politics does not mean opposition to compromise — "just the opposite." "In the world as it is, no victory is ever absolute; but in the world as it is, the right things also invariably get done for the wrong reasons." Revolutionary youth may have "few illusions about the system," but they have "plenty of illusions about the way to change our world."

As to the JOINers' response to Alinsky, from Sonnie and Tracy we only have the charge that he was "stuck in the past," and, perhaps, most cutting, unwilling to confront white racism. JOIN pushed whites on the race question "at every opportunity." The group "even mobilized members to support Rev. Martin Luther King Jr's campaign to desegregate housing in Chicago in the summer of 1966."

Alinsky had held aloof from the Chicago Freedom Movement. He had seen it as a vehicle for King and his southern leadership to meet the challenge of growing black dissent by demonstrating, in the course of a brief summer, an ability to score a "victory in the North." For Alinsky, the suspicion was confirmed when, after failing to manoeuvre Mayor Daly into a sufficiently damaging confrontation, King balked at a march through the red-lined suburb of Cicero, "the Selma of the North," and as his ticket out of town accepted a toothless open-housing deal.

Yet Sonnie and Tracy concede that JOIN numbers on the housing marches never exceeded a couple dozen, and they do not relate any other attempts to advance a distinctly integrationist agenda. JOIN was not an all-white organization. Its Welfare Union in particular has strong black leadership. Nonetheless, JOIN and its successor organizations announced their anti-racism, less through active integrationism, than through coalition with other groups in "other" communities with a sense—and typically an ethnic sense—of their own boundaries. Engaging in a class-wide struggle may have been the strategic goal, but as Panther Bob Lee remarked, the "code for class struggle" was the Rainbow Coalition.

This was a position that had been prepared within the SDS. Lenin, Mao, Castro, Che, and Cabral had been ransacked in the RYM battle to defeat and expel the Progressive Labor Party faction. Denying the legitimacy of Third World nationalisms (the self-determination of "oppressed colonies") within the United States, the PLP had continued—Jeff's "Old Left"—to argue for a unitary class-based movement.

But if, as Sonnie and Tracy suggest, leaders, "core cadre," in many of these organizations continued to look to such scripture for theory, what else were they finding there, and how did it shape their attempts to formulate a radical community-organizing strategy that would avoid the pitfalls of the Alinsky model?

In the summer of 1967, Frank Reissman summarized a case against Alinsky that was surely familiar to the JOIN activists. Seeking to explode "The Myth of Saul Alinsky" (*Dissent* 14), Reissman argued that rather than politicize an area, Alinsky's organizational efforts simply directed people "into a kind of dead-end local activism." Alinsky's opposition to large programs, broad goals, and ideology confused even those who participated in the local organizations because they find no context for their action. As a result, confined to what might be secured by purely local initiative, they achieved, at best, "a better ghetto."

Reissman insisted that it was for the "organizer-strategist-intellectual" to "provide the connections, the larger view that will lead to the development of a movement," but adding, as Hilary Rodham (Clinton) notes in her outed 1969 college thesis on Alinsky, almost "as an afterthought," that "this is not to suggest that the larger view should be imposed upon the local group." But again, from Sonnie and Tracy we have little idea of how the "cadre" wrestled to square this circle—of how they saw the balance, however struck, between local initiative and national perspective, securing their organizing efforts against the hazards of co-optation.

Kirkpatrick Sale (*SDS: The Rise and Development of The Students for a Democratic Society*, 1973) recalls that the most dispiriting aspect of the ERAP experience was that however much they might talk at night about "transforming the system," "building alternative institutions," and "revolutionary potential," staffers knew that their credibility on the doorstep rested on an ability to secure concessions from, and thus to develop relations with, the local power structures. "Whether JOIN or GROIN", far from erecting parallel structures, projects were built "around all the shoddy instruments of the state." ERAPers were caught in "a politics of adjustment" whose principal function is "to manipulate and control conflict."

For Alinsky this was the "eternal problem." Confronted by *Playboy* ("Empowering People, Not Elites," March 1972) with Mayor Daley's presence (and Wallace stickers) in Back of the Yards (with "the tendency of communities you've organized eventually to join the establishment in return for their piece of the economic action"), Alinsky explained that the life span of one of his organizations was five years. After that it was either absorbed into administering programs (rather than building people power) or died. That was something that just had to be accepted, with the understanding that "discrimination and deprivation does not automatically endow [the have-nots] with any special

[moral] qualities" and that "all life is a series of revolutions" (perhaps he would move back into the area to organize "a new movement to overthrow the one I built 25 years ago").

For Sonnie and Tracy, the doctrinal commitments of organizers in groups like Angry and O4O are simply taken as understood, and left to stand as a token of an enduring revolutionary politics that itself is the final explanation for the fact that by early 1970s much of this core cadre had moved on.

### **Left Exit**

GIVEN THE REVOLUTIONARY OBJECTIVES they had sought to pursue through community organizing, Sonnie and Tracy suggest that "an ideology that promised a break from the one step forward, two step back pattern" was "a logical and necessary next step." Having "grappled" for years with "the limits of neighborhood politics," many of the original organizers turned to party-building efforts within the post-RYM New Communist Movement, to groups like the October League (Marxist-Leninist), and what was to become Bob Avakian's Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). Few of the community-organizing groups survived the split over the party question (a fate Angry avoided only by dissolving itself in anticipation of the mounting tensions).

Other factors, Sonnie and Tracy concede, were moving in on the store-front left by the early 1970s. After years of struggle in which revolutionary change had been not just the goal but the expectation (for Tappis it had seemed that it would "only be a couple more years"), veteran organizers were beginning to think about family and careers. (Tappis went to college and later reinvented himself as a currency and commodities trader —"speculating" he insisted, not against working people, but against the banks").

With the rise of the New Right, there may also have been the perception—the reverse of Hayden's ERAP thesis—that the real danger, and thus the most urgent organizational work, was after all in the middle class. (This had been Alinsky's parting suggestion: Nixon's "Silent Majority," living in frustration and despair, worried about their future, was "ripe for the plucking by some guy on horseback promising a return to the vanished verities of yesterday.")

There was also the gathering repression. This may have been as nothing compared to the physical elimination of the Panthers, although the impact of this was certainly felt. In 1969, the killing (in his bed) of Chicago Panther Fred Hampton, mentor to the Young Patriots (and the occasion for the Weathermen's declaration of a "State of War" with the United States), was traumatic. But the harassment, the red baiting, was persistent. Even the health clinics, raided by police and strangled by new licensing laws, did not escape. Facilitated as it was by increasing police infiltration, the impact on morale could be devastating.

(Sonnie and Tracy hint at, but do not explore, the possibility that the core-cadre model contributed to exploitable tensions within these organizations. From my own brief experience with a radical community-service organization in Boston in the 1980s, I recall the unease as some polemical slip by the leader/aka "coordinator" intimated that we off-the-street volunteers were recruits to some larger, undeclared ideological vision, strategy, and purpose, that there was a hierarchy of initiates — that there was a manipulation.)

Certainly, the impatience "to get past incremental change and reach thousands rather than dozen of people," which Sonnie and Tracy regard as ultimately decisive, was not a peculiarity of a "Maoist-influenced Marxism Leninism." When in August 1968 JOIN suspended its local work, it was to take on one last campaign: Terry's vice-presidential run behind Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver's on the populist Peace and Freedom Party ticket. In 1970, the YPO also went national with a "Patriot

Party" franchise. Nor is it the case that the vanguard splinter organizations to which Angry, White Lightning, and O4O veterans gravitated had any greater prospect in gaining real political traction — even if some of them have had staying power (the RCP, now offering Bob Avakian's "BASICS" in "a range of downloadable formats," will soon be celebrating forty years).

Was "building a national movement" simply then a line of retreat from the projects? This is not how it was seen by those who took the party path. O4O's Dan Sidorick insists that his commitment to the New Communist Movement (much as he regrets its debilitating sectarianism) responded to "a real need to think beyond the neighborhood and analyze how we might change the course of the nation." There is also the possibility that, at least in part, this was a "need" learned from, and communicated by, the neighborhood itself.

Working in an ERAP project in Hoboken in the summer of 1965, Nick Egleson concluded that the lassitude he and his co-workers encountered was not necessarily because people "had no experience with community organization." Rather it could be because people "have had just that experience" and because to a degree greater than they, "the hopeful organizers," could allow, the residents appreciated "the smallness of the organization compared to the enormity of the problems." For the organizers the challenge was that, from the outset, they were being confronted and confounded on the doorstep with a common sense (however partial or ill-informed) of a bigger picture.