

The Antiwar Movement in New York City 1965-67

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[Roy Lisker's report on Teague's effort to organize a demonstration to prevent a bombing!]

By December 1965 anxiety over the escalation of bombardments over North Vietnam was growing in the American anti-war movement. Now the bombing of Haiphong, the port of North Vietnam's principal city, Hanoi, seemed inevitable. In spite of all the promises given by Lyndon Baines Johnson, this stepping up of the intensity of the war (which in retrospect was but a prelude to what was to come) appeared almost insane. For many of us the bombing of Haiphong appeared as a kind of threshold, a point of no return. If and when it was initiated almost anything might appear justified in halting the war.

Bombing raids in the outlying districts around Hanoi did in fact start up early in 1966, with the targeting and destruction in January of its electric utilities. In the coming weeks the bombardments would augment to such a degree that it could scarcely be doubted that Hanoi was the next step. Was this not in fact the point of no return to which so many people were alluding?

Still there was no radical change in the strategies of the organizations opposed to the war. The documentation of these bombardments as it appeared on the pages of the New York Times, was couched in language so neutral and vague that few readers would notice anything extraordinary in what was taking place. The dreadful news neither electrified nor unified the peace movement. Rather than serving as a call to arms, current events, underlining our continuing impotence in the face of political reality, merely increased our depression. This sense of helplessness influenced both the debate within each group, and the relations between them. However in New York City, around the beginning of December 1965, meetings were organized to discuss what might be done in the eventuality that Haiphong harbor, or even Hanoi itself, were bombed. Two weeks before Christmas Walter Teague III, founder and principal animator of the Committee to Aid the National Liberation Front (CANLF) sent out a memorandum to virtually all of the anti-war groups in the New York City area. It invited them to send representatives to a meeting, at which joint actions to be undertaken in the eventuality that Haiphong or Hanoi were bombed would be proposed. Given the urgency of the crisis the usual distinction made between the Marxist groups supporting the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) , and the pacifist groups who opposed all sides of the conflict, was overlooked.

The initial response was strong. The first meeting took place at the Greenwich Village Peace Center next to Sheridan Square. The representation of antiwar groups was broader than anything I'd seen before. The only successful collective effort to date had been the setting up of the committee to organize the great annual Peace Parade down 5th Avenue. It was destined to remain so.

Among the organizations filling the main auditorium of the Greenwich Village Peace Center one found most of the non-violent civil disobedience groups, such as the Committee for Non-violent Action (CNVA), the New York Workshop in Non-Violence (NYWIN), and the Catholic Worker (CW) . A sampling of Trotskyist splinter groups showed up including the Spartacists , the Militant Labor Forum (MLF), Youth Against War and Fascism, The Committee for the Fourth International, (C4I), and the Progressive Labor Party. Among the Socialist organizations were the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), and the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) . Middle-class liberal organizations were represented by Women's Strike for Peace (WSP) and the organization for a sane nuclear policy (SANE). In addition there were a sampling of smaller organizations representing a wide range of opinion, such as the Anarchists, the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and so on.

Walter Teague III was there as moderator, and as the representative for the CANLF. I was there as one of the two delegates representing NYWIN. Notably absent were the Society of Friends, the traditional Socialist Party and the traditional Communist Party. None of these, to my knowledge, ever contributed to or participated in direct action campaigns against the war, although individuals may have done so.

We were a motley crew, and the chances for successful cooperation were dubious from the start. Walter Teague's opinions were certainly more extreme than those of most of the groups he'd persuaded to come together. His was the group one could expect to unfurl the NLF flag at anti-war marches and rallies. All the same he demonstrated considerable tact in dealing with the divergent views present that day. One has to admit in fact that his gifts as a political organizer were impressive. He was the kind of person who would not hesitate to load a table with literature from North Vietnam, essentially propaganda, right at the intersection of 6th Avenue and 8th Street in the West Village. This attracted large, often belligerent crowds, against whom he was prepared to defend , in a provocative manner, the cause of the National Liberation Front. He risked arrest for creating a public disturbance (one could not, in a free society, overtly charge him with subversion), as well as more direct forms of violence from the public. Despite these hazards he was able to direct and focus the intense level of excitement in this unruly mob and keep the dialogue alive.

The signal failure of the Haiphong Rally attempted a few days before Christmas cannot therefore be attributed to his lack of skill as an organizer, nor to any flagging of ecumenical spirit. The causes for this fiasco must be sought in the internal dilemmas of the anti-war organizations, dilemmas which , in a larger sense, plague the entire American Left.

Following his opening address, Walter Teague set out the goals of the meeting: the sudden escalation of the war had taken everyone by surprise. All the groups represented were affected by it. Indications strongly suggested that the Pentagon was already working on the details involved in bombing Haiphong harbor.

It was possible however that the timing of this new crisis could be made to work in our favor. Christmas was approaching, traditionally a period of generosity and compassion for one's neighbors. In the coming weeks the streets of New York would be filled with Christmas shoppers from morning to night. Could we find ways to reach this essentially captive audience, to convey a sense of the horror of the military options it would soon be asked to support? The demonstration needed to be well organized and well timed. Ideally we might catalyze a popular reaction that would compel the government to put its relentless escalation of the war on hold.

Even before Walter Teague had finished the presentation of his proposals the sniping had begun. The first disputes arose over what sector of the general population to address. The Trotskyist organizations, spearheaded by the shrill voice of the woman representing the Committee for the Fourth International, insisted that the rally, leafletting, march, or whatever else we came up with, had to be in accordance with the historic mission of the vanguard of the working class. Recent events had rendered the cliché meaningless at best: the AFL/CIO had just issued a strong statement in support of the war. The Trotskyist groups suggested that a march be organized that would go through the garment district and end up in front of the headquarters of the AFL/CIO. Then speakers would exhort the workers to oppose their own unions and embrace, not the cause of compassion for the Vietnamese people, but the goals of the Communist parties of Vietnam and China .

The woman from the Committee for the Fourth International shrieked that the inevitable revolution depended on a support base in the working class. Any political action whatsoever not based on the reality of Class Warfare was frivolous. Other speakers stood up to argue, with various degrees of calm, for the necessity of appealing to the workers. What was remarkable about these proposals is that, although they came from organizations known to spend far more time attacking each other than making common cause against the enemy, they all showed a similar lack of imagination. Nowadays it isn't easy to define what is meant by the appellation "worker" : skilled workers like plumbers or electricians? Skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled construction workers? Factory workers? Longshoremens? Clerical workers, secretaries, nurses, janitors? School teachers? Migrant laborers? Indigent or unemployed? All of these groups are either workers or exploited, or both, yet one cannot deny that their interests, even their "class interests", differ greatly.

Despite their differences, the representatives from the extreme Left could at least unite themselves around one common cause: unanimously, they rejected every proposal put forward by anyone else. There were, it is true, a number of far-fetched schemes that didn't deserve or weren't intended to be taken seriously, but were fun to play around with. By widening the scope of our imaginations they could, and did, lead to more practical strategies .

One of these was that we rent a boat to sail up and down the Hudson River, from which we might 'simulate' a symbolic invasion of New York by the North Vietnamese army ! This was transmuted over time into the scheme of dropping leaflets onto the city from the rooves of skyscrapers, in imitation of the warnings of an impending bombardment that will sometimes be dropped on the targeted city . It must be confessed that I was the one who suggested that we rent a helicopter for this purpose!

From these suggestions came an agreement to produce a leaflet modeled on those that are used to warn civilian populations. Walter Teague asked for volunteers to form a planning committee to write and edit its text. This was done; then the gathering set about determining what conclusions the leaflet should state, as well as the form of the demonstration.

What resulted was an interminable discussion lasting over many hours. By midnight it was realized that an accord would never be reached, neither on the major issues nor on the small technicalities . An agreement had been reached in principle, that a circling picket-sign -and-banner march could serve as the core demonstration, around which each group could organize its own event. If the anarchists wanted to throw pamphlets from helicopters, guaranteeing certain imprisonment and possibly a black eye from the pilot, let them do so. The Trotskyists could march to the AFL/CIO headquarters if they wanted to.

When the meeting broke up at 1 in the morning, it had been decided that the march would be situated on the large traffic island opposite Herald Square, at 34th and 5th Avenue in front of Macy's, on the evening of December 23rd, 1965, that is to say, the final shopping day before Christmas. Under Walter Teague's supervision, the committee would produce the first draft of the leaflet within a week, for review by the collective at the next meeting. Teague would begin contacting the police immediately for the permits needed to hold a demonstration in Herald Square.

The text presented to us for revision at the next meeting, although dilute and some what innocuous, did manage to assimilate most of the concerns of the groups involved. What remained after being mutilated out of recognition was a masterpiece of the genre, something of an object lesson in the absurdity of trying to find a consensus among all directions of the Left. It is instructive to retrace exactly how consensus was obtained after eight hours of wrangling.

The meeting began at 8 PM. By 2 AM not a single issue of any importance had been decided, neither about the text of the flyer, nor about the choice of slogans permitted or acceptable to all groups. This particular issue had always been the Achilles Heel of such large-scale cooperative ventures. A few months later I would witness a similar crisis at a meeting of the 5th Avenue Peace Parade Committee. For four long hours arguments raged over whether the slogan Bring the troops home immediately! should go on its banners, as opposed to just Bring the troops home! . The word immediately had been rejected by the more conservative groups such as Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) and the Woman's Strike for Peace (WSP). These carried great influence on account of their numbers. They claimed to be worried about the economic chaos that might result if the troops were recalled from Vietnam right away. SANE and WSP assured the Committee that they would not allow their members to march in a parade in which the message Bring the troops home immediately! was publicly displayed.

At these meetings organized around the Haiphong rally, things never got to the point at which a decision had be made between equally innocuous slogans. Ultimately no universal slogans were selected. Rather, each group informally pledged to deploy slogans that would not offend the others.

As for the flyer so carefully edited by Walter Teague and others, it immediately fell prey to the savagery of the participants. The initial draft of flyer was a compilation based on every proposal enunciated at the first meeting. At the top of the page , in enormous block letters was printed the announcement:" Your city will be bombed in two hours! ". The statement below this explained that a leaflet of this sort was about to be dropped over Hanoi and Haiphong . It was the duty of responsible American citizens to unite in preventing this. Below this stood an appeal to the spirit of Christmas . A final paragraph expressed solidarity with the struggle of the workers. All in all, the text was an ingenious synthesis of prevailing views in the group.

Though conceived of with the notion of reconciling opposing viewpoints this document had the opposite effect of hardening oppositions, placing the differences of perspective between the different groups in sharp relief . The extreme Left, Marxist-Leninist or Trotskyist, condemned what they considered to be the 'adventurist' character of the flyer. They now claimed that they'd never given their approval to the idea of a mock bombardment warning . Such a flyer, they said, would simply confuse public opinion without informing it.

At the other extreme the representative for Woman's Strike for Peace was concerned that we would unduly terrify our audience. Only by staying calm, she argued, could people maintain their objectivity.

Others thought that it gave the typical Christmas shopper more credit for intelligence than he merited, and there were some complaints to the effect that it had something of the character of a publicity stunt characteristic of Madison Avenue but unworthy of the seriousness of our cause.

Based on what he was hearing from the auditorium Walter Teague cut and reconfigured the text. What had begun as a synthesis of Leftist opinion ended up as a rag filled with the usual concoction of banalities and cliches.

The overly prolonged discussion proved fatal to consensus . With every hour increasing the level of frustration, half a dozen delegates left the auditorium. By 2 AM only Walter Teague, the delegate from the Committee for the 4th International, myself and 3 other people remained.

It was at about that time that Charley Brown entered the room. "Entered" is perhaps too neutral a word: "Eruption " is more appropriate to the impressive spectacle of his black cape covering him completely, like a chrysalis, from neck to toes , his flowing beard and mighty wooden crucifix suspended about his neck with links of chain. To complete his personification of the pacifist Batman, an enormous yellow CND symbol had been sewn onto the back of the cape. Evidently Charley Brown was one of the more colorful figures of the New York anti-war scene. No one was surprised to learn that Charley Brown wasn't his real name: it had been assumed as a mark of respect for the comic book character. Probably it ought to be thought of as his religious name. He gave impression of having , several years previously , gone through a spiritual crisis that had changed him from a normal and perhaps even commonplace individual, into a guru of Christ and LSD.

Charley Brown was undeniably intelligent. Given that he was almost always under the influence of some sort of hallucinogen, what he had to say was coherent, even sensible at times. He seemed to have made the bad habit of always showing up at the least opportune moment into a fine art, in the middle of an intense or contentious debate for example. Irregardless of its appropriateness, every occasion was seized on to preach his private brand of anarchism.

Not in the least put out by his unannounced entry , Walter Teague welcomed Charley into the discussion. Accompanying him was a friend who, by his own account, had just breezed in from California. This person had no idea even of what we were talking about, let alone the recent history of the New York anti-war movement. All the same, he was filled with all sorts of ideas about what we ought to be doing to get our act together.

After extracting whatever teeth remained in our pathetic document, the vindicated delegate from the Committee for the 4th International got up and left. What remained from over a score of organizations consisted of Walter Teague, Eric Weinberger of the Committee for Non-Violent Action, myself as representative of the NY Workshop in Non-Violence , Charley Brown, and his Californian sidekick. Eric Weinberger, eventually co-founder of the anarchist soup kitchen movement "Bread Not Bombs", just wanted to go home and sleep . He did not conceal his annoyance at my persistence in trying to make something meaningful out of the document: mathematicians try to do that sort of thing . By 4 AM however I was completely on his side, and made the motion that the meeting be adjourned.

It is hardly surprising that the joint declaration that came out of the meeting was a derivative accumulation of cliches, the very reading of which was painful. The "unanimity" that had allegedly been obtained across the spectrum of the Left resided only in the existence of our text and not in anything that

it said. In much of politics, the contents of a document may have little importance relative to the simple existence of that document. Read , for example, the Declaration of Independence, as a literary essay, and compare one's assessment to its impact on history!

A final, mercifully brief, meeting a few days before the demonstration, was taken up with the technical details, allocations of costs, obtaining permits, and so on. In retrospect this was the meeting that should have lasted 8 hours. Quite a number of surprises awaited us on the evening of the great event.

It is helpful to have a clear description of the layout of Herald Square. It is a traffic island laid out in the form of a small isosceles triangle. Its short base is to the north, along 35th Street, while the two longer sides descend along Broadway and 6th Avenue to a point on 34th Street. Macy's, on Broadway and the west side of the square, is some distance away. On a dark night, despite the powerful lights around the department store, it is somewhat difficult for anyone standing on the sidewalk to have a clear idea of what's going on in the traffic island.

To guarantee that our march would be contained within the square the police had taken the initiative of surrounding its perimeter with sawhorses and barricades. 300-odd demonstrators were crammed into a narrow strip about 10 feet in width on the west side: both the east and the north sides of the island had been closed off by the police for what they claimed were security considerations. In addition to being tightly squeezed into a narrow space, we couldn't raise our picket signs and banners without colliding into and jousting one another. These in any case were all but illegible from the entrance to Macy's.

The dissension that had marred the planning meetings was not long in asserting itself at the demonstration. In marked contrast to the insipid content of the leaflet, the disturbances that erupted were not lacking in originality. The Spartacist contingent had never taken seriously the gentleman's agreement to avoid using slogans that might offend others. Suddenly, on a pre-assigned cue, a half-dozen black banners were thrown up. They all carried the same message in luminescent paint:

USSR! Protect North Vietnam With Your HYDROGEN BOMB Shield!

Evidently they didn't give a damn about solidarity with anyone else. It hardly mattered that even these high profile banners weren't visible from the sidewalk outside Macy's, that pedestrians had no way of distinguishing the peace marchers from the pan-handlers and street people. These slogans, with their brutal frankness, offended almost every group present. Conservative groups like Woman's Strike for Peace stepped out of the march. They did not want it to appear as if they advocated the dropping of nuclear bombs.

The pacifist groups decided to form a delegation to negotiate with the police to open the north side of Herald Square for an independent march. The police complied, and the north side was made available at around 9 PM . Persons who did not want to be identified with the Spartacists, (about half of the demonstrators including all of the pacifist groups), joined the new march; the extreme Left took over the original march. More police barricades were set up to further emphasize the separation between the two marches. However, owing to its geographical position the new march was completely hidden from spectators standing on the sidewalk in front of Macy's.

In a short time the pacifist march began to develop problems of its own. Now it was the Anarchists who were emboldened to unfurl banners stuffed with obscenities. This effectively scattered what was left of the contingent from Women's Strike for Peace. Many of us began to think that the Christmas shoppers we were trying to reach would be more confused than edified by a peace march divided into two hostile camps. Lacking substance, the leaflets being handed out at the street corners did little to clarify the message we were trying to get across. In a short time the demonstration had dwindled down to a quarter of its original size. Some hold-outs, including myself, stayed for another twenty minutes, just for the pleasure of walking around. By 9:30 the march had completely dissipated, signaling the end to a particularly disastrous, yet not atypical, anti-war demonstrations in New York City during the winter of 1965-66 .

In a letter written to NYWIN a few weeks later, Walter Teague inserted a bitter aftertaste: not one of the invited organizations had contributed its share of the expenses. Because of this, the CANLF was bankrupt, and would no longer be operational for an indefinite period. While sharing in his censure, I don't believe that one should fault the anti-war organizations on the grounds of opportunism. They all operated on shoe-string budgets. As far as it affected him personally, it is my impression that Walter Teague III had independent means.

[Roy Lisker on US left's difficulties connecting to "man on the street."]

The Haiphong Rally highlights the kinds of obstacle faced by the American Left, not only in New York City. Among the factors contributing to its failure one can single out: a weakly developed sense of context; a general sense of impotence often accompanied with demoralization ; and a wrong-headed notion of the nature of public opinion.

A poor understanding of context results in a consistent tendency to miscalculate the effectiveness of an action, or even its significance relative to current events. This was much in evidence during the endless discussions over which social class ought to be addressed, what message to give them, and what form the message should take. The proposals of the extreme Trotskyist groups combined an obstinate dogmatism over the obligation to address the workers, with an embarrassing inability to define the kinds of workers they wanted to reach, or even what they looked like. They spoke for the interests of the workers without bothering to ask for their opinion. Organizing demonstrations exhorting workers to go against their unions and support the political platforms of North Vietnam and China, was not the wisest strategy at that moment.

For their part anti-war pacifist organizations like NYWIN, CNVA, FOR and WRL may have been too preoccupied with reaching out to an idealized vision of the public mind. It would be very wrong to accuse them of publicity seeking for its own sake. Many people seemed to be unaware of the fact that, apart from the great spectacles like the 5th Avenue Peace Parade, only a 'judicious selection' of their demonstrations made even the back pages of the New York Times.

The obsession of the peace groups revealed itself in the constant use of phrases such as " the public won't understand", or " that will create a bad impression" or "we have to educate the public" . These things do matter, yet to totally sacrifice the expression of an important idea, (e.g. the Haiphong Rally leaflet) merely to project an image that may be understood by the public, (3 vague notions in a row)

implies, to my way of thinking, too much confidence in the mythical entity dubbed " the typical man in the street". Democracy may be built on this fiction, but the ways of mankind are not quasi-ergodic.

The groups I worked with for 2 years in New York, from 1965 to 1967, spent too much time talking among themselves and not enough in locating the "generic man in the street" and asking him for his opinion. I realize that these words carry a certain amount of acrimony, but they derive from experience. Headquarters for the militant non-violent anti-war groups in the mid- 60's were all on the 10th floor of an office building at 5 Beekman Street in New York's Wall Street neighborhood. Among them were to be found the New York Workshop in Non-Violence (NYWIN), the Committee for Non-Violent Action (CNA), the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) , the Student Peace Union (SPU), Liberation Magazine, and the Catholic Peace Fellowship (CPF).

In all my time there I don't recall having ever seen a black or Hispanic representative present at any of the meetings of these groups. The New York pacifist anti-war movement was predominantly Middle Class, with few connections to the classical civil rights movements or to the masses of oppressed people they claim to represent. In making such an appraisal I have to remind myself that Jim Peck, one of the officers of the War Resisters League, was also a founding member of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and famous as one of the most uncompromising and daring of the civil rights activists in the South during the 50's and 60's .This proves nothing one way or the other. It is nonetheless true that the antiwar movement was not in touch with the grassroots movements for social change in the United States at that time.

Certainly no racial or economic barriers were placed before anyone wishing to come down to the headquarters at 5 Beekman Street and participate in the discussions. The problem I think is that, if and when a black radical happened to pass by the offices at 5 Beekman Street for a visit, he encountered an alien atmosphere unconnected to his needs or interests. Devoid of any sort of ethnic prejudice the Peace Movement created a de facto segregation by virtue of its having nothing to offer the victims of social injustice. It is a fact that in New York City, as well as in other major American cities, the movement against the war in Vietnam was far away from the streets. High up on the 10th floor at 5 Beekman Street, it invested much of its time discussing the most effective way to "create the right impression", or to "make itself understood" to "the man in the street".

Now to the second point: the sense of powerlessness shared by practically the entire American Left. This attitude comes, I suspect, from a kind of obstinate delusion common in the United States where , in the presence of so many institutions of a despotic character, most citizens, including most intellectuals, still believe the system to be fundamentally democratic. It has sometimes been described as a "benign totalitarianism". The events of the last five years, such as the enormous escalation of the war in Vietnam, the reinstatement of the draft, the riots in the ghettos, the racist brutality in the Deep South (not excluding much of what goes on in the North) , the minuscule progress in civil rights, the enormous power of the extreme Right in governmental circles, raises doubts as to how benign that totalitarianism really is.

The pathological inertia of the bureaucratic process, highlighted by the sudden collapse of Johnson's so-called 'War on Poverty', the power of corporate interests over all aspects of government , the shameless manipulation of public opinion by the press, the military and the schools, work together to submerge the democratic ideals in which Americans believe, and which so many of them feel they have

a right to impose on the rest of the world.

A left-wing activist doesn't know where to begin his struggle against the totalitarianism of these institutions. As terrible as the situation is in Mississippi, the right to vote of its black population has been, at least, a concrete issue on which one could continue to agitate. It may sometimes be more difficult to oppose a "right to vote", which has already been granted yet which it manipulated to the point of being virtually worthless. The vote can't mean very much if the electorate is obliged to choose between Goldwater and Johnson. At the same time it's difficult to know exactly what one ought to do to change the situation.

Independent political parties can of course present alternative candidates. These have almost no chance of getting a hearing from the electorate. One votes for them as a symbolic act. What they receive will be from the membership of their tiny party, from personal friends and sympathizers.

At each election, parties such as Progressive Labor, the Socialist Workers Party and other groups always propose a slate of candidates for every political office, including the presidency. In the 70's my sister ran for governor of Pennsylvania on the Socialist Workers Party ticket. David McReynolds, active for many years with the War Resisters League, had been presented several times as the presidential candidate for the American Socialist Party. Bradford Lyttle, founder of the Committee for Non-Violent Action, created his own party, the Pacifist Party, and runs himself for president.

Everyone recognizes that some black activist, unknown apart from a handful of well-wishers in his Trotskyist party headquarters in Cincinnati, Ohio, has no chance of becoming president. He has no money, no access to the press. Popularity is worth more than ideas in American elections, and popularity is a form of merchandise marketed by the propaganda industry: newspapers, television, advertising and the movies.

Such candidates are put forward merely to affirm the right to do so. Any native-born citizen of the United States has the right to run for president. If these symbolic candidacies prove anything at all, it is in their demonstration of the immense gulf separating the reality of American democracy from the myth.

Many initiatives on the Left are symbolic exercises of rights that in fact exist only on paper: the presentation of candidates for political office, the refusal to pay taxes that support the war effort, the efforts to engage well-known political figures in constructive dialogue (such as the invitation extended to Hubert Humphrey to attend a meeting of the Progressive Labor Party), boycotting the Chase Manhattan Bank because of its support for apartheid in South Africa, and so forth.

Such actions are morally necessary, and in fact I support all of them, knowing that the majority serve as mere dust thrown against the wind. Neither I nor most of my acquaintances will open an account with the Chase Manhattan Bank, although one can be certain that the Rockerfellers couldn't care less. They know that one will never be able to mobilize more than a negligible fraction of public opinion on our side, let alone put people into positions of political power on the basis of their support for our campaign. The picture differs radically from one state to the next, and occasionally such initiatives may sway enough of the electorate in California or New York to make a difference. Most of the population of the United States however is concentrated in extremely reactionary states such as Texas, Ohio, the Carolinas, Mississippi, Arizona, and so on .

Despite the rapidity of modern communications a peace demonstration in New York City rarely resonates in the rest of the country. This was true even for the 5th Avenue Peace Parades. By April 1967 I was living in Philadelphia again, my home city. The Peace Parade drew me , along with many others, back to New York City for a day. Estimates for the size of the turnout to this event varied greatly: my informal estimate made in consultation with others put the figure at a minimum of 200,000 marchers .

Philadelphia is less than 90 miles from New York. That evening upon returning I picked up copies of the early evening editions of the local newspapers. They cited the ridiculously low figure of 5,000 or fewer demonstrators. One paper conceded that perhaps as many as 25,000 had been there.

Philadelphia is a big city, with a population of 2 million. By and large it learns about what's going on in the outside world from three extremely reactionary newspapers: the Bulletin , the Inquirer , and the Daily News .(By the 80's all 3 papers had merged into the Inquirrer, which meant that a city of this size was getting, and was content to receive, but a single perspective on the greater world.)

The New York Times cited a figure of 100, 000, about 50% of the real total. Considering its normal coverage of such events, this was acceptable. Despite its evident superiority over the rest of the American press, the New York Times can hardly be considered an organ of the radical Left! The sad truth is that, despite the impressive achievement of the organizers of the 5th Avenue Peace Parade in bringing together 200, 000 marchers from across the country, the majority of Philadelphia's inhabitants received the impression that a straggly band of college drop-outs, dirty and unshaven, had wandered down 5th Avenue in the rain and been dispersed by the police.

If a parade as large as this one could be denigrated down to nothing , in the press of a city less than a hundred miles away from New York, its easy to understand that the smaller demonstrations which were now occurring on a daily basis in New York City had absolutely no effect on the rest of the country.

Let us examine how these factors were played out in the context of a very different kind of action, the draft card burnings of 1965. These were, at least, productive of a enormous amount of media coverage.

In 1965 a bill was pushed through Congress asserting that the mutilation or destruction of a draft card was punishable under Title 18, with sentences of up to 5 years of imprisonment and/or \$10,000 fine. The radical Catholic draft-resister David Miller was the first to openly defy this law in a public demonstration. Although there were laws requiring all draft eligible men to carry this registration card on them at all times, since World War II many people had lost or thrown away their card without ever being hauled in court. The passage of this law had been a product of war hysteria to gratify the extreme Right and intimidate the anti-war movement.

A follow-up draft-card burning demonstration was scheduled for the following month. Its participants were Tom Cornell (FOR, the CW and the Catholic Peace Fellowship which he'd set up with Jim Forest) and Mark Edelman, who was only with the anti-war movement for a short time. It was planned to take place on the steps of the federal courthouse in Foley Square in lower Manhattan.



Left to Right: Tom Cornell, Marc Edelman, myself, David McReynolds. At the far end to the right, AJ Muste

Before the arrival of the demonstrators, the courthouse steps were mobbed with TV cameramen, reporters and a sensation-seeking mob out to get its thrills from witnessing American patriotism under fire. There were also a few committed anti-war activists. The situation was so bad that Mark and Tom were afraid that even a lit match in such a crowd might result in someone being burned. Finally the event had to be cancelled.

It was therefore rescheduled to take place on November 6. Tom Cornell and Mark Edelman were joined by 3 others: Jim Wilson, a young man facing 2 years imprisonment for refusing to register for the draft, David McReynolds of the War Resisters League, and myself. It would turn out to be among the most successful of all New York City anti-war demonstrations in that period.

Intensive planning took place all through the month preceding the event. Much of the discussion at our meetings centered about the effective manipulation of media coverage. All of us (and I definitely include myself) believed that the workers of this great nation (All nations are great by definition) would be edified during the consumption of TV dinners earned by the sweat of their brow, watching TV images of 5 young men, well dressed, well educated, and well-spoken, doing their duty to humanity by burning their draft cards. We did not doubt that the typical "man of the people" (whose heart is always in the right place though tragically misguided) would enthusiastically endorse our ringing challenge to

an unjust federal law in the name of higher principles of conscience.

To bring about the effect that we sought, we did what we could to make a favorable impression on all the journalistic media, television, radio and newspapers. Several days before the event a press conference was held in the ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria hotel at which representatives from every New York media organ were present. Our passionate concern that we not be misunderstood did not prevent a number of radio stations from insinuating, somewhat maliciously, that we were publicity seekers and nothing more. Our sobriety of dress, determined on the advice of our ACLU lawyers and others, gave the impression that we were on our way to our jobs as school-teachers. In responding to questions that were often rude or biased, we comported ourselves with the dignity befitting middle class intellectuals. We were nonetheless treated as 'beatniks', 'riff-raff', 'scum' and so on. It must be conceded that our combination of suits and ties, recent haircuts and courteous manners rang a somewhat false note in the light of our manifestly anarchist intentions.

Sensibly, the demonstration of November 6th was moved from the steps of the Foley Square courthouse to Union Square at the intersections of 14th Street, 4th Avenue and Broadway. As its name indicates this park has served traditionally as a setting for labor movement and other left-wing rallies. The neighborhood is intensely commercial, with a long corridor of discount stores and restaurants along 14th Street, and office buildings along Broadway and 4th Avenue .

On the morning of the demonstration a high wooden speaker's platform was erected to face the large open space in the center of the square. A space for the press had been reserved in front of this platform. We expected, and received, coverage from the local, national and international press. Indeed, a photograph of our demonstration, with accompanying article, was printed in an edition of the principal newspaper in North Vietnam . (I was about to write ' Hanoi's government-controlled press', although the monotonous support for government and military in our own press mocks the very idea of freedom of expression.)

Reporters had been coming up to the 10th floor of 5 Beekman Street on a daily basis, to conduct interviews with us and with the leaders of the Peace Movement. On the morning of the demonstration journalists from the Herald Tribune and the New York Times followed us in taxis all the way to Union Square, a distance of about 3 miles. After it was over they followed us again all the way back to Beekman Street. Any one of us had he been so inclined could have launched a career as a movie star .

Sitting on the platform with us were two venerable elders of the American Left, persons rightly deemed of enormous stature in 20th century American history : Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker, and the 90 year old minister, A.J. Muste, a tireless militant radical, then president of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. They were there to lend support to the demonstration and did not give any speeches.

The crowd of 300 contained a mix of sympathizers, curiosity-seekers and hecklers. A guitarist led off with a number of peace movement ballads. Each of us read a short prepared statement. Then, as we all removed our draft cards from our wallets Mark Edelman produced a cigarette lighter. The show was on.

The legions of the press went wild. Papparazzi to the core, their behavior towards us was predictably obnoxious. Some of them yelled to us to show more of our profiles, lift the cards higher, face the audience. They fought with one another for convenient angles of vantage and acted in general like the crowd at a bull fight. Their hectoring chimed in with the heckling coming from certain parts of the

audience, lending to our already acute sense of anxiety and personal distress the trappings of farce.

A minor incident came as something of a relief: someone with little sympathy for our cause, or perhaps merely a novel sense of humor, opened a fire extinguisher on us at the moment we began igniting our cards. It was inevitable that most of the TV networks and newspapers would select this key moment as the focus of their coverage of an event that lasted an hour and a half. The reporter from the tabloid New York Daily News even wrote that because of the fire extinguisher we had cancelled the entire demonstration! No one in fact got it quite right, yet we could take some pride in the photograph of our drenching that filled the front page of the New York Times. The counter-demonstrator was hustled off by the police. After assuring them that we were not going to press charges, we lit matches, the cards were re-ignited, and everything went off without a hitch. After the singing of a few more folksongs, we were escorted through the crowd by a police cordon to the cars awaiting us for the trip back to 5 Beekman Street.

The aftermath was different for each demonstrator. The case against David McReynolds was dropped; no one, including McReynolds himself, knows why. The Federal District Attorney , Peter Fleming, may have thought he couldn't get a conviction against him because McReynolds was already in his 30's. The defense strategy of the ACLU (which did not get us an acquittal but did set a legal precedent), was that burning a piece of printed cardboard worth less than a quarter constituted "symbolic free speech". James Wilson's sentence was assimilated into his two year sentence for draft resistance . After over two years of court delays and postponements, Tom Cornell, Mark Edelman and I were handed down 6-month sentences. The NY state court of appeals exonerated us and the case went to the Supreme Court.

Freed on my own recognizance and tired of waiting around I departed for France in February, 1968 . A letter from the ACLU arrived in Paris that June. It informed me that the Supreme Court had refused even to look at our case. My instructions were to go to the Foley Square courthouse immediately and turn myself in to the FBI to begin serving my sentence. I was happy in France and decided to stay. Tom Cornell and Mark Edelman gave themselves up and served their time.

In the spring of 1972 I opened up negotiations with the FBI, Mark Karpatkin, Jr. , the leader of the ACLU team, serving as interlocutor . It was arranged , contingent on my immediate return to the United States, that no extra time beyond the 6 months would be added on . Returning to New York in August, 1972, my time was served in the West Street jail in New York City, Danbury Penitentiary, Connecticut and Allenwood Penitentiary, Pennsylvania. Upon my release in early 1973, Genevieve Manseau, my fiancée at the time , took me to Montreal and a new chapter in my life.

On the basis of this , and other, experiences, I've come to the conclusion that its a mistake to design demonstrations merely to reach public opinion. This may be a major American myth, but when all is said and done it is just a myth. Madison Avenue methods can't work against Madison Avenue, it's vain to imagine otherwise. The false equation which equates success with public support may prevent one from making an objective assessment of the real value of public opinion. One runs the risk of placing the success of one's initiative under the direct control of monopoly forces opposed to any change in the status quo. Gauging the success or failure of a draft card burning demonstration by the coverage it gets in the newspapers may perhaps be compared to handing a sword to a dragon and asking it, very politely, to commit suicide.

The problem of inventing and mounting actions which relate realistically to external realities is only one side of the difficulties faced by the New Left. There is a constant need to deal with factionalism, the hostilities that may erupt between organizations, even within the context of joint actions, and the useless in-fighting one finds in every sort of organization whether it be Marxist or pacifist.

Such phenomena typify left-wing politics everywhere: the speed at which mistrust and breakdown of communication develop within an organization seems to be in inverse proportion to the amount of real power in its possession. Had there been some form of united action that could have halted the Vietnamese war in a predictable time period, (and it is a popular and much overworked cliché that even the government itself was caught in a "quagmire" far beyond its initial projections) the antiwar organizations might have resolved their differences long enough to accomplish it.

This explains why the 5th Avenue Peace Parades were the only collaborative effort that succeeded in bringing together all the tendencies of the Left, even those whose hostility towards each other was implacable. The spectrum of affiliations represented in these marches ranged from the most strident Stalinists to the most genteel of the peace organizations like SANE. The sight of 200,000 persons walking down 5th Avenue gives the same feeling of achievement to a Spartacist that it does to a Catholic Worker.

By the end of the 60's a great many people were opposed to the war in Vietnam and getting them to express their solidarity by a march wasn't that difficult. Yet in measuring the success of groups trying to bring about radical change it is not sufficient to consider only such grand spectacles. For the rest of the year, most of the people who march in them had no affiliation with any of the organizations of the New Left. Unlike the situation in many European countries, the Left in the United States operates completely outside the official political process. Registering to vote as a Democrat does not constitute support for the Opposition.

The picture becomes even more discouraging when one considers the failure of so many attempts to set up genuinely alternative institutions. Even the minimal solidarity needed to sustain a vision beyond their formulation often turns out to be too much to hope for. As a notable exception to this rule one may invoke the Afro-American civil rights movement. What has given this movement its unique staying power is the continuing presence of the open wound created by the 1860's war. Its utterly unbelievable levels of violence climaxing the centuries of slavery that preceded it, set up a division in the national consciousness that to this day transcends Establishment politics and corporate greed.

[The Free University of New York - Roy Lisker's experience in 1965-67]

In this regard it is instructive to study the failure of the attempt to establish a Free University of New York. Founded in 1965, it had auto-destructed by the time of my departure for France in February, 1968. In the summer of 65, about a dozen or so disaffected scholars came together for discussions around the idea of setting up a radical alternative university in New York City. The person responsible for bringing us all together and the driving force behind the idea was Allen Krebs. He'd been dismissed from Adelphi College on Staten Island from his position as instructor in the Political Science department because of complaints about his handling of a course on Marxist economics.

In its letter of dismissal, Krebs had been charged with fanaticism: we are all deeply sensible of the jealous regard of traditional universities towards their reputation for objectivity! One hears of members of the John Birch Society teaching at American universities who remain in good standing despite their fanaticism. Furthermore, the devotion that Allan Krebs brought to his Marxist and Maoist principles did not quite come up to the obstinate conviction of those professors of Political Science and Economics who have dedicated themselves to pushing the dogma of Free Enterprise and the Free Market down the throats of uninformed, trusting and innocent youth. Unfortunately, in light of the subsequent exposure which the faculty of the Free University of New York would receive to his methods, Adelphi's decision proved to have been justified.

It was a time when many institutions of higher learning were getting rid of teachers with known leftist sympathies. Eugene Genovese, who has written so eloquently on the history of slavery, was fired by Rutgers for stating that he wished for a Viet Cong victory. Another professor was dismissed from Brooklyn College, a branch of the State University of New York (SUNY), for publicly rescinding the loyalty oath then demanded of all faculty in the extensive SUNY system.

The people that Allen Krebs engaged to set up the Free University of New York represented every shade of opinion across the New Left: poets and writers, disaffected scholars, union organizers, activists, free-lance journalists and publishers, creative individuals of every sort. Our goal from the beginning was to establish a forum in which every direction of contemporary political activism would be represented. Courses were to be taught by persons actually involved in bringing about the changes they were advocating.

The curriculum for the first two terms contained, in addition to those on leftist politics, courses ranging from hallucinatory drugs to sexual liberation to astrology. Important courses were offered that were not available, or even imaginable, at many main-stream universities: History of the American Left (Staughton Lynd); History of the Labor Movement (Stanley Aronowitz); Cuba Today; Training in non-violent tactics; History of the National Liberation Front. Paul Krassner, editor of the scathing and satiric political magazine, *The Realist*, gave a course entitled "Why the New York Times is funnier than Mad Magazine." I myself offered a course on modern European scientific ideologies: psycho-analysis, existentialism, phenomenology and positivism. (Within a few years these evolved into a pair of courses which were presented in Philadelphia in 1967: Epistemology of modern physics; and History and Epistemology of modern psychiatry. The course notes for these have been worked up into books which are on this [website](#))

The enthusiasm that prevailed in the first term of the Free University of New York, from November '65 to February '66, carried over into the spring. It was an inspiring time for all concerned.

By then however it had become crystal clear that the original promoters of the concept had never really wanted a free university. From the beginning all decision making was concentrated in the hands of a small number of persons of virtually identical ideological persuasion. These people had not been selected at random. Although Allan Krebs had succeeded in projecting an appearance of democratic procedure, he wasn't going to allow any opinions contrary to his own to determine the policies of the school.

The frankest expression of the real intentions of its directors was made by Roger Taus, a Krebs'

aide-de-camp, at a faculty meeting towards the end of the first term. In explaining why a course about Fascism that had been proposed by a professor at Columbia University was not acceptable to them, he commented: " An objective account of Fascism must be Marxist-Leninist. Therefore the course on Fascism he is proposing can't be objective."

All through the summer of 1965 everyone involved in the school, both teachers and students, contributed several hours per day to rehabilitating the locale. Classrooms were created in lofts on the upper two floors above a wide store front on 14th Street, (between 5th and 6th Avenues and a block away from Union Square). Keys to the building had been handed out to us while this work was in progress. Towards September, a few weeks before classes were due to begin, Allen Krebs brought in a locksmith and changed all the locks. Locks were also put on the telephones and the door to the main office. No-one had been consulted or told: it was a takeover bid, pure and simple.

After that three people alone decided who could enter the building and when: Allen Krebs, his wife Sharon, and Secretary-Treasurer James Mellon. A series of insurmountable physical barriers now separated the loyal inner circle of the school, both from the student body it was designed to serve, and a faculty which soon came to realize to what extent their reputations had been cynically exploited by its originators.

We discovered that there was no accountability for the finances of the school, firmly in the hands of Sharon Krebs and James Mellon. The fee for per course at the Free University had been fixed at \$3.00 . This was more than reasonable, even by 1965 prices. On the positive side, the policies of the school were generous in admitting those who didn't have the means to pay. The word "free" in Free University meant, as in any other non-profit enterprise, "after expenses" . This tuition went to cover the rental of the premises, utilities, transportation for the instructors, and working expenses. What was left over was supposed to go into a fund which might eventually be used to pay us a small salary.

But in practice no-one had any idea where the money went. James Mellon never allowed any of us to see the books. Broaching the subject to him at a faculty meetings could result in a temper tantrum. Along with charging us all with ingratitude, he might hurl accusations against specific individuals.

The following months brought a series of unpleasant incidents, effectively dispelling all remaining doubts that the Free University of New York was being run as anything other than a dictatorship, based on a political ideology emanating directly from the headquarters of the Progressive Labor Party. Both Mellon and the Krebses were officers in the New York chapter of this Maoist party. Some of us began to suspect that the money being paid into the school was being used as a direct source of financing for the PLP.

Examples of such incidents include the insulting treatment being handed out to right-wing or conservative participants in forums and open discussions at the school; the increasingly hostile treatment meted out to persons proposing courses at variance with the PLP line; the undemocratic ways by which certain people gained access to administrative positions ; the personal accusations and slanders, including trumped up charges, leveled against people the PLP affiliates didn't like; and other things of a similar nature.

To me the saddest element of this ruthless takeover of a potentially revolutionary institution by the adherents of a dogmatic ideology , was that no one seemed to really care very much. No doubt I am

being too hasty in my judgment because months after quitting, I was still learning of faculty members organizing among themselves to wrest control away from the Maoists, though without avail. While I was still there as much time and energy as I could spare was devoted to rectifying the situation.

A personal crisis was reached mid-way through the second term when, at a faculty meeting, Allen Krebs accused me of stealing school property and James Mellon threatened to throw me down the stairs. These slanders did not affect my standing with the rest of the faculty; they rather contributed further to opening our eyes as to the true character of the people we were dealing with.

Soon afterwards Paul Krassner got disgusted and left. A month later a biting satirical takeoff on the Free University of New York appeared in *The Realist*. After learning of this misconduct the writer and social philosopher Paul Goodman, author of several works on alternative institutions of education and one of the co-founders of Black Mountain College, withdrew his offer to give a course. I held up longer than most but eventually followed suit.

For most of the members of the glamorous leftist faculty the Free University had solicited one semester was enough. Implicit in their sudden departure was the notion that the institution held nothing worth preserving: the Maoists had set the tone and nothing could be done about it. Tuli Kupferberg, poet and founder of the provocative anarchist Rock Band The Fugs , ("Kill For Peace") tried to set up a chapter of SDS at the Free University. It was banned less than a month later. A well-attended debate between Allan Krebs and Hermann Kahn, ("Thinking The Unthinkable") of the RAND corporation , brought a group of Young Republicans to the building. They explained that they were there to hear Kahn defend their beliefs. The whole contingent was rudely pushed out the front door by security monitors under orders from James Mellon.

From 1967 until its demise a few years later, the "Free School of New York" (The name "Free University" had to be dropped because New York State law requires that a 'university' have at least \$100,000 in the bank.) was a Progressive Labor Party institute for the teaching of Maoism. A handful of neutral courses continued to supply a veneer of freedom of thought, but one only had to read the ads that appeared in the *Village Voice* and *New York Times* to know its true agenda. We must consider ourselves fortunate that its influence never grew to the point of touching off a Cultural Revolution in the United States.

Along with the brief and exciting flowering of Underground newspapers, the Free University movement was an important development in the evolution of the New Left of the 60's . Victim to the contradictions inherent in the makeup of the New York Left, the Free University of New York could do no more than hint at the possibilities of what might have been accomplished.

Through the presentation of a series of representative developments we have tried to evoke the context in which the antiwar movements of the 60's in New York City operated. The issues at stake were not specific, of course, to New York City alone, or even to the United States. They were typical of what one can expect to happen whenever intellectuals try to organize themselves around concerted action against unjust governments engaged in crimes against humanity . Factionalism, quarrels over means and ends, the difficulties involved in well-defined objectives, takeovers of collective enterprises by narrowly conceived ideologies, are endemic to leftist politics everywhere. Few human beings are really free in their own minds. Power plays, clashes of ego, grand-standing, even despotism are bound to arise in

organizations, however idealistic, set up for achieving political goals.

The ways in which the New Left of the 60's in New York City interacted, with itself and the surrounding society, provide one with crucial insights into the overall structure of American political reality.

The first thing to note is that direct access to conventional power politics, that is to the electoral process now in the hands of the Democratic and Republican parties is virtually impossible for anyone with a left agenda. There are some exceptions, but the overall picture is unchanged by them. As it is, political activity in New York City is particularly intense. In comparison much of the rest of the United States appears to be sleeping.

Yet even in New York City, as much today as it was in the 60's , one will find no representative of any alternative party in any elected position in the municipal government. The Democratic Party presents itself as the liberal alternative, and encourages all independent radical causes to ally themselves with it. Someone with a more discerning perspective would rather be inclined to conclude that the Democratic and the Republican parties are merely the carrot and stick of a consistent program of behavior modification. Very often, appealing to the two established political parties serves merely to give a veneer of credibility to career politicians who do not merit it.

The overall effect of this ostracism from the official political process is that any initiative taken by the Left is always partly paralyzed from the beginning by its sense of futility. The inevitable factionalism dissipates what little force remains. In the long run, one is obliged to treat left-wing politics as a pastime, like playing golf. Those who refuse to acknowledge that a passionate commitment to social change should be treated as a mere hobby, condemn themselves to a sub-standard existence, working for organizations with an ephemeral life-span.

Without access to the press, without a voice, pushed out to the fringes of a monolithic capitalist society, unable in good conscience to accept employment across a wide spectrum of professions, a sincere believer in the politics of opposition who wants to live and work in New York City, must also struggle against a economic environment that is particularly harsh and desperate, a struggle which, in fact, he must eventually lose. One way or another, the kind of life one is forced to live is best exemplified in the word "hustling" .

One also has to deal with the relentless manipulation of public opinion by Madison Avenue, the media and other propaganda vehicles. Much has been written on this subject. Yet I had the impression at times that there was an excessive need for the New York Left to justify its existence through the credibility acquired through recognition by the press. Although no thinking person would acknowledge the principle that states that truth must lie with the majority, so much of American life is built around this notion that it is almost impossible to resist it in practice. At the same time if one allows oneself to be seduced by this doctrine one risks seeing one's hopes for lasting change suffocated under the forces of reaction, fashion, and public opinion. It becomes impossible to construct an image of one's public save in terms of the means by which it can be reached. And these means are always in the hands of the enemy. It has become adept at persuading the mass that it believes what this small group of people wants it to believe: that's public opinion. In practical terms one cannot present the facts of any issue of political substance to the news media and expect that they will be communicated to the public in some recognizable form.

It is my hope that this all too brief report conveys something of the experience of involvement in leftist activities against the Vietnamese War, in New York during the crucial period of its escalation into a major conflict.

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Several subtitles added to this long piece by web person, Walter Teague.

Original can be found at:

<http://www.fermentmagazine.org/Bio/newleft1.html>