

<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4334>



Reaching for Revolution

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Friday 25 December 2015

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Something magical happened when Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps joined forces to craft this enthralling account of the U.S. Left from its upsurge after World War II to the near present. The two activist scholars, noted for distinguished books of their own, orchestrate stunning erudition, rigorous argumentation, lucid language, and a cohesive narrative to address a serious and taxing topic. [1]

Radicals in America is a learned volume, unsurpassed for a supreme command of the facts, yet is also a political breakthrough in the battle over memory of the postwar Left. Exemplifying what Walter Benjamin meant when he referred to "the past charged with the time of now," [2] this account does not merely tell the old story of the Left in new clothes. Its pages embody the spirit of resistance come back from the dead to redress injustice.

A book aspiring to be comprehensive runs the risk of overwhelming the reader with a mass of narrative detail, but the style is so luminous, the design so superb, and the judgments so precisely executed that Radicals in America remains intellectually riveting throughout. Such an inspirational achievement will abet a new generation of idealistic young people in answering the call of history as we all face the unexpected and unremitting demands of this new century of war, racism, environmental catastrophe and growing inequality.

Brick and Phelps coolly present groundbreaking research into a well-kept secret: Many of the renditions of radical history that obtain the greatest popularity, or notoriety, are not necessarily those that embody the emancipatory heart of the social movement. This requires the complication of an already complicated tradition, which they achieve by nonchalantly lobbing some silent grenades into prevailing paradigms.

What is original, in addition to the coverage of the most recent seven decades, is an unabashed and respectful inclusion of many maligned radical outlaws and pariahs, as well as heterodox Marxist organizations and dicey political episodes. These are mostly hot potatoes not to be found in the recent crop of works on the subject from a moderate socialist perspective: Michael Kazin's *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (2011), Eli Zaretsky's *Why America Needs a Left: A Historical Argument* (2012), and Rhodri Jeffrey-Jones' *The American Left: Its Impact on Politics and Society Since 1900* (2013).

All three of these are rich in arresting arguments that overlap with the volume under review. Too often, however, they defer to strategies of smartly reframing well-known material in a way that quietly deletes the more feisty, inspiring and in some cases more critical elements of the radical tradition that are unearthed and carefully explored in *Radicals in America*.

In this manner, Brick and Phelps implicitly contest not only these latest three books, all of which seek to vindicate liberal social democracy, but also several earlier ones idealizing the Popular Front of the 1930s-'40s or romanticizing "underground" cells of ultraleft fugitives of the 1970s.

Perhaps because they have years of first-hand experience with militant social movements, the authors seem to know exactly what they want to say and how to say it. The upshot is partisan, committed scholarship giving no quarter to the false impartiality of academic life, yet communicated through succinct, vivid prose that is contemplative, measured and carefully composed all nicely pitched for a general audience.

Margin and Mainstream

The stakes involved in this aspiration to accurate remembrance are immediately demonstrated through the authors' opening vignette of a 36-year-old African American from Jamaica Queens, New York. Winfred Lynn was a militant whose anti-fascism led him at the time of World War II to oppose conscription in the segregated army, a racist institution that he considered to make a "mockery of fighting for democracy." (1)

What ensued in 1942 is a microcosm of the book's narrative as a whole: The moderate National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) refused to take Lynn's case, judging it too radical and unpatriotic. This bequeathed Lynn's defense to his younger brother, attorney Conrad Lynn, himself a Far Left activist expelled from the Communist Party in 1937 for refusing to accede to the Popular Front policy of opposing workers' strikes in Trinidad, and subsequently attracted to Trotskyism.

Soon joining Lynn's defense was A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, yet another arch-rebel and at that time an unforgiving critic of the racial hypocrisy of a U.S. democracy compromised by capitalism and imperialism. Randolph famously went against both middle-class liberals and the Soviet-enthralled Communist Party when he launched the March on Washington Movement to desegregate the U.S. army in 1940.

Ultimately Lynn's political stance, regarded even by many on the Left as extremist and disloyal, won out in 1948 when Randolph's new threat of civil disobedience pressured President Truman to issue a directive to desegregate the military. In Congressional testimony that year, Randolph recalled the importance of "the famous Winfred Lynn case." (3) When the Executive Order was stalled due to a confusing timetable, Lynn himself reappeared on the scene in a militant "Campaign to Resist Military Segregation" that brought him together with Trotskyist-turned-pacifist A. J. Muste and one-time Communist Bayard Rustin, the latter about to be persecuted for his homosexuality.

The Lynns' story of intransigence, at a time that even many Leftists mythologize as one of "anti-fascist unity," establishes an understanding about the essence of the postwar radicalism that is the subject of this book. While the idea of a segregated military nowadays would be deplored by the mainstream, few realize that the critical role in inaugurating the struggle for its abolition fifty years ago was enacted by former Communists, Trotskyists, and revolutionary pacifists in the political margins.

Brick and Phelps explain: "The waxing and waning of radical fortunes across this entire period are best understood by apprehending margin and mainstream as the constitutive duality of the American radical experience....Radicals oppose existing society, placing them on the outside, but at the very same time desire a future in which their values are made the basis of a restructured society." (7-8)

What is required for a method to assess the history of this struggle is to navigate a "dialectic [that] entails a tension between two commitments: the willingness to hold fast for a minority view and the struggle to imagine and help fashion a new majority." (8)

A muddling factor is that, when victory is partially achieved, the extreme radicals who launched the offensive often become "invisible." (311) For example, those who took variously critical approaches toward the liberal and Communist embrace of the World War II policies of the Allies are commonly consigned to political purgatory, despite the eventual widespread acceptance of the views on racism and wartime atrocities that they championed in the 1940s.

This is also true of the historical resistance to the Vietnam War. After the 1960s, U.S. arrogant aggression and falsifications of history were roundly condemned by the liberal mainstream, but there is little acknowledgement that

opposition was inaugurated in the 1950s and early 1960s by highly marginal pro-Communists such as the National Guardian newspaper editors, the Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party, and Maoist-Stalinists of the Progressive Labor Party.

The lesson is that radicals ultimately need to find a way to the majority of the population (the mainstream), to broaden support outward from their core constituencies, to speak credibly and legitimately for society as a whole; but such activists will lose the crucial radical location (the margin) that provides insight and vision when they yield to a perspective of simply pruning the capitalist system of its excesses, something required if one aims to influence policy from within the main institutions.

In other words, radicals are not cheerleaders for the acceptable political candidates shoring up the status quo. A radical is someone who stands beyond the mainstream, building social movements for the system's overturning and its holistic replacement; radicals play catalytic roles as organizers on behalf of an alternative future, a transformation of the culture they oppose.

In their willingness to employ the threat of civil disobedience, promote third party movements, and engage in other activities beyond the pale (including support of armed self-defense for African Americans), radicals must endure vitriolic opposition from liberals, persecution by the state, and long periods of marginality.

The Defiant Ones

Radicals in America employs a strategy of reperiodizing the postwar era in seven sections. Instead of the conventional thinking by decades the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, etc. the dates are 1939-48, 1949-59, 1960-64, 1965-73, 1973-80, 1980-89, and 1990 to the present. Brick and Phelps also introduce each segment through portraits of authentic rebels expressive of the period.

When we add in the book's cogent Introduction describing the "Margin and Mainstream" perspective, and its magisterial if concise Conclusion addressing "Radicalism's Future," we have the architecture for an intricately layered narrative. This book can be seen partly as a chronicle of repressed national memory, even as it makes us reassess what we thought we knew about postwar radicalism and provides "a storehouse of past radicalisms [that] may provide creative inspiration" for the unscripted future. (321)

The portraits at the lead of each of the seven core chapters replicate the pattern set by the one of Winfred Lynn. Thus personal histories are recreated against a broader social backdrop to show the meaning of living a radical life, in addition to the ways in which behavior is influenced by unfolding events and context. In these brief chronicles we can sometimes see sobering parallels between then and now that may offer insight into our own predicament of margin and mainstream.

Brick and Phelps breathe life into the following figures:

" Emil Mazey, a veteran of the dissident communist Proletarian Party and then the Socialist Party, and a UAW leader opposed the No Strike Pledge, who in 1946 spearheaded a rebellious protest of 10,000 U.S. troops against an occupation of the Philippines that was engaged in suppressing former allies in the People's Anti-Japanese Army (the Hukbalahap guerrillas).

" Claudia Jones and C. L. R. James, Afro-Caribbean leaders of the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers

Party, who were targeted for deportation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1948, then respectively exiled in 1955 and 1953.

" Gloria Richardson, a 39-year-old African American single mother who led the Cambridge, Maryland chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), bringing a prophetic revolutionary consciousness to the wave of protests between 1962 and 1964.

" Steven Kiyoshi Kuromiya, a 25-year old Japanese American activist, born in a World War II relocation camp, who launched the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in Philadelphia in 1969.

" Julia Reichert, a working-class first generation college student from a conservative background who was recruited to the New Left New American Movement (NAM) in the 1970s and emerged as one of the premier independent radical filmmakers of her generation.

" Benjamin Linder, a radical engineer, unicyclist and entertainer from Seattle who in 1987 was murdered by U.S.-backed contras in Nicaragua where he relocated to aid the Sandinista cause by helping on a small-scale hydro-electric project.

" Winona LaDuke, an Ojibwe from Minnesota who fought for the rights of indigenous people internationally and joined Ralph Nader as vice presidential candidate of the Green Party in 1996 and 2000.

Much of the U.S. radical past is refracted through these lives, and as each chapter evolves this background progressively becomes the foreground. What we see in the personal stories are variations on themes that a radical needs indignation, a "utopian" image of an alternative, and a commitment to militant activist policies that confront social structure; that a truly dissident radical among more orthodox political thinkers can be treated like a witch in church; and that the longterm outcome of actions and inactions are often totally unpredictable.

A Dozen Tabs Open

Brick and Phelps have a dozen tabs open at any one time, readily accessing topics such as Chinese Americans, Latinos, Filipinos, the Women's Movement, the Gay Movement, Black Nationalism, Maoism, Trotskyism and so much more. This is all against a "global tableau" (15), even as the two scholars draw on numerous disciplines including music, film and literature to communicate a wealth of information with rare immediacy.

The resulting interconnectivity is so fluid that each story line taps into multiple subtopics just as one chapter felicitously bleeds into another. Here is one sample of some of the provocative analysis that results:

"Gay liberation...was a product of the Vietnam radicalization. As draft resisters refused to serve in the military, Americans accused them of softness and weakness, prompting the New Left to greater militancy and masculinity. That, in turn, generated the eruption of both women's liberation and gay liberation, turning New Left analyses of oppression upon the New Left's own practices. The draft, meanwhile, compelled those attracted to others of the same sex to come to terms with their sexuality, since admission of homosexuality could disqualify one from service, sparing one from having to kill or die in Vietnam but eliciting ostracism from family, friends, and employers, accentuating a sense of injustice." (122)

Such appraisals are backed up with documentation, often from primary sources such as leaflets and interviews. Every moment, we learn, is multi-shaded and full of unexpected challenges. Above all, Brick and Phelps excel at synthesizing complex political histories.

Their treatment of the Communist Party (CPUSA), for example, starts by acknowledging its positive contributions: "The CPUSA reshaped the culture of the left, particularly because of its emphasis on interracial unity." Brick and Phelps then move to critics of the CP's Popular Front who countered "that the optimal road to transformation lay in autonomous working-class militancy and internationalism forged 'from below,' not a left liberal version of American nationalism that gave political support to the Soviet state." (22)

Finally, they point to the failure of this opposition to make real headway: "Radicals of the anti-Stalinist persuasion, however, were unable to unify and all too often lacked interest in doing so, reveling in polemics over doctrine, analysis, and strategy. The Bolshevik model's valorization of correct leadership and programmatic homogeneity contributed to repeated schisms...." (24)

Other scholars, including Kazin, have acknowledged contradictions in the record of Communism; however, the first 88 pages of *Radicals in America* explore the CPUSA practice from the 1930s to the late 1950s with a refreshingly meticulous eye that is as free from jaded anti-communism as it is from the New Left tendency to shrink the enormity of the Stalinist fallacy.

Scholars prior to Brick and Phelps have sometimes treated the political developments of the Far Left of the early 1970s as if through a fuzzy mirror. In contrast, *Radicals in America* provides expositions of smaller socialist organizations with care and subtlety, for the reason that the authors are not ready to junk everything that occurred in these lean years. They do not scorn and dismiss but attempt to understand the appeal of these minority movements, because contemporary radicals might wish to recoup some elements even as we substantially rethink them in new and creative ways.

Here is what they say about the attraction of Maoism among New Left veterans, people whom one would imagine to be allergic to such Old Left sectarianism:

"The hope was that a selective "party of a new type" would draw together the most combative, advanced workers, allow for variety in thought while securing unity in action, and use members' skills around the clock rather than rely on paper membership. Orientation toward working-class organizing and Lenin's criticisms of left-wing terrorism as an alternative strategy seemed more rational than the "armed struggle" fantasies that still cropped up elsewhere." (193)

And here is part of their comparison of New Left era Trotskyism and Maoism:

"Trotskyism and Maoism were separated by many shades of sensibility and not just the merits and liabilities of particular Communist states. Trotskyist groups were more open to women's causes and the gay movement, Maoists to "cross-class" alliances. The two did, however, share some things in common, even if they were loath to admit it. Each was based on the doctrines of a chosen master thinker, emphasized correctness of line (Maoism) or program (Trotskyism), and saw Soviet Communism as insufficiently revolutionary." (192)

To be sure, many of these grouplets lived a short life and died an obscure death. Nonetheless, Brick and Phelps resist the temptation of purely negative filtering the picking out of objectionable details in their political history and dwelling on them to the point of driving out the positive.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-91 was a letdown even for those Leftists in tendencies that had always denounced the brutalities of Stalinism; we had hoped for socialist renewal but instead got further unrestrained capitalism along with right-wing nationalisms, East and West. In reviewing the subsequent years, Brick and Phelps reproduce a number of discussions that animated the Left, and readers may be surprised that many exchanges are still relevant today.

In the 1990s, attacking what they saw as irresponsible radicals who had created a "balkanizing 'identity politics,'" Todd Gitlin, Michael Tomasky and Richard Rorty called for "a revived reformist patriotism and redistributive class politics." (273) In response, Robin Kelley compellingly argued that identity politics comes in many forms and some versions may actually promote unity on a more effective basis. Simultaneously Manning Marable, an exceptional figure whose voice is much-missed today, offered extensive documentation as to how the economics of the racial divide "still worked to preclude interracial action on working-class grounds." (274) Then as now, responding thoughtfully to one's less radical opponents can assist in showing roads not to follow.

When they move next to the political debates of the new millennium, Brick and Phelps offer a cool-headed accounting of the appearance of "Liberal Hawks," whose views began to crystallize 10 years earlier in controversy about humanitarian intervention in Bosnia, but with palpable ideological links to Cold War liberalism and even Wilsonian idealism. Distinctions between these and the "democratic left" (associated with Dissent magazine) are noted, but also a unity in "excoriating anyone to their left," starting with Edward Said and Noam Chomsky. (297)

Brick and Phelps are undoubtedly in the camp of the latter, and against those who try to browbeat radicalism into limited choices by hurling epithets to sear us with marginality; these include "anti-American," "self-hating," "anti-Semitic," and not being part of the "decent Left" moralistic phrases crafted for mainstream consumption. Nonetheless, they also have a keen and caustic eye for the "foolishness" of certain radicals in the days of 9/11: Bill Ayers insisting that "I don't regret setting bombs" and Ward Churchill condemning "the little Eichmanns" in the twin towers. (298)

They candidly note that "big demonstrations against the Iraq War were organized by ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), front group of the Workers World Party, a neo-Stalinoid sect that supported Saddam Hussein and admired North Korea." These embarrassments recall foibles of the 1960s and earlier, reminding us that seriously bad ideas can have a remarkable staying power. Nonetheless, the point is that "such inanities paled next to the war itself." (299)

An Interim Statement

A book this compelling is duty bound to come up with its own set of recommendations. The final ten pages on "Radicalism's Future" will disappoint only those who demand a resounding repetition of old revolutionary prescriptions.

The wisdom of *Radicals in America*, despite its appreciation of older traditions of thought, is its acceptance that we now live in a world invaded by new problems and perplexities with which these older programs may not be able to cope. What is required is to widen the options of revolutionary socialism, to develop ways of thinking without a preconceived chord sequence.

Brick and Phelps have taken us on this sometimes painful journey into the past in order to educate us away from the simple political certainties generated in bygone periods; one might even say that they have demonstrated the right of political movements to fail on the road to what we hope will be a more genuinely emancipatory sequence.

Consequently, this is not a work that will resolve by formula the eternal question of exactly when radicals should put forward their platforms in opposition to a broader movement that arises, or join that movement to become its Left wing. It does not even attempt to answer the question of whether the present decline of unions and working class consciousness are due to proletarian incapacity in neoliberal world, or temporary conditions that will soon become surmountable due to economic catastrophe or the discovery of more appropriate organizing strategies.

Recognizing that a confluence of unpredictable historical factors shape every era, Brick and Phelps address the prospects for radicals winning a wide hearing and spurring mass movements in terms of dialectical paradoxes, although they are adamant about a needed "respect for organization" to recognize and respond to changing events.

Thus they have much to praise regarding "recent styles of radicalism" that emphasize "pluralism, flexibility, and lack of coercion, imagining radicalism as a loose and shifting confederation of causes and groups," but also warn against "the extremity of its localism, rigid dislike of anything suggesting 'universalism,' or common goals for diverse constituencies, evasion of the problem of organization, and disinclination to submit tactical options to democratic decisions." (318)

To be sure, a bureaucratic machine-Leninism is out of the question; whether the genre of the vanguard political organization is obsolete, or a mass revolutionary socialist party is gone from the picture, remains to be seen.

Radicals in America unavoidably retraces some familiar ground even as it tilts toward being a survey instead of a seminar; there are omissions, arguments not pursued, failures to follow through on consequences of insights, and it is skimpier on theory than assorted readers might prefer. More explanation might have been provided about the distinction between politics that are radical and revolutionary, since the latter adjective crops up quite a bit.

Certain standard topics, such as the Jewish-American presence on the Left and its role in relation to Black Liberation in the past and Palestinian human rights in the present, are left begging for the kind of informed and creative take that Brick and Phelps could surely provide. The problem of what radicals, who are often a tiny minority, mean by "democracy," which usually denotes the rule of a majority, is raised early in the book (10), but never clarified to my satisfaction.

Finally, the issue of the development of "leadership" is somewhat skirted, although the authors would agree that this is not going to be something just "tweeted" into existence any more than an effective organization. We need to study the record of charismatic people not merely as the authors and communicators of ideas, but also their human practice in implementing policy and building groups through tactical and strategic decisions.

The personal presence of luminaries of the Left is admirably evident throughout *Radicals in America*, yet many function like fireworks—popping, flaming, ascending and disappearing. Such abundant fractional portraits whet our appetites for the kind of depth and detail likely to be found in discrete monographs. Yet there will always remain gaping holes in our comprehension that no one will be able to fill.

A good Bolshevik, like the proverbial good man or woman, can be hard to find. Too often radical activists, like others, fall under the sway of the seductive powers of a fiercely assertive person who appears to combine militant conviction with some actual accomplishments. More than a few of these have perpetrated damage due to troubled psyches and shambolic personal lives, not to mention revealing themselves as outright shape-shifters or morphing into embittered apostates who end up inciting pitchfork-wielding mobs against their former comrades.

Sectarianism, too, can be a personal pathology, lying dormant until it is prodded awake and flames into a consuming wildfire with devastating political consequences; someone needs to write an anthropological study of that exotic tribe

of "Leninists" who devote their lives to exposing reformist betrayers. [3]

Radicals in America is to be commended for recreating so many lives that have been partially obliterated if not erased from public memory. Brave and compassionate, squarely on the side of the marginalized, the scholarship of Brick and Phelps is written with such moral vigor and intellectual panache that it surely merits widespread recognition as a classic in the study of the U.S. Left. A brilliant effort to reconcile the collective and individual dimensions of the radical opposition that appears at a moment when we have long been a besieged minority and on the defensive, its publication disproves the axiom that it's only the "winners" who write history.

Radicals in America must be understood as an "interim report." Still, it's a book with a mission, to assist our Leftist political wagers as actors, not just spectators. What shines through is the authors' love of their work – a commitment to the radical alternative. While no group on the Left today is the sole possessor of apostolic succession, the kind of radicalism that Brick and Phelps uphold is necessary if we are to stand up to those who would force us to acquiesce in narrow options. We have experienced defeats, but the record indicates that new opportunities will emerge in unexpected forms. The theme song of this book is that we must recognize them when they do.

[Against the Current](#)

[1] Howard Brick is best known for *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (2006) and Christopher Phelps for *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (1997).

[2] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 261.

[3] Tim Wohlforth and Dennis Kourish already made a start in this direction some years back with *On the Edge: Political Cults Right and Left* (2000).