

The New American Movement and Why It Failed

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Stanley Aronowitz heard about the New American Movement (NAM) long before he joined the organization in the winter of 1976. That year, he moved from New York to southern California to work first as a visiting professor at the University of California, San Diego, and then in the History Department at the University of California, Irvine. During this time, Aronowitz was involved with NAM regionally, in particular with NAM's Los Angeles Socialist Community School, where he taught classes on labor history and Marxism and frequently spoke at events. Aronowitz served on NAM's national leadership and, as a nationally recognized scholar on the theory and history of the American working class, he functioned as one of the organization's most public voices, alongside Barbara Ehrenreich.

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With the partial exception of feminism, the early 1970s witnessed the end of the protest and resistance era. The mass antiwar movement declined; Nixon's embrace of neoliberal economic and social policies caused the roll-back of the New Deal and its post-World War II legacy; inequality grew in American society despite temporary gains due to a brief labor upsurge and the Kennedy and Johnson administration's antipoverty programs. Even in the midst of black uprisings in many Northern cities, the Black Freedom movement failed to gain economic equality despite the best efforts by Martin Luther King and some of his successors. And after Eugene McCarthy's challenge to the pro-war Democratic Party establishment and Robert Kennedy's late conversion to left-liberal ranks, Left electoral optimists such as socialist leader Michael Harrington hoped the two major parties would realign. "Realignment" was a strategy to drive the conservatives out of the Democratic Party and bring independents and progressive Republicans into a coalition with the liberal Left.¹ But the return to electoralism signaled the demise of the popular-protest era. The standard bearer was South Dakota Senator George McGovern who had served in the Kennedy administration.

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A professional labor historian who had written a fine study of the Colorado Coal wars, McGovern was an early and fervent Vietnam War opponent and a mild, but firm, progressive who was alarmed at his party's retreat from its own recent history. He welcomed support from the largely middle class Left-liberals who were confident that they had effected a major change in their party's politics. Among the recent college graduates were Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton, the most famous of the centrist political establishment's long list of future members. Unfortunately, the missing ingredient in McGovern's campaign was the politically powerful and financially well-heeled AFL-CIO, which at the time represented about a quarter of the labor force, most of it in manufacturing and construction industries. The unions usually supplied the Democrats with about a third of their campaign funds and a small army of volunteers. But in 1972, the unions stood firmly with the Old Guard. When they lost at the convention with few exceptions, notably the United Auto Workers, they chose to sit out the campaign, a decision that was widely interpreted as a tacit endorsement of Nixon. More to the point, theirs and the Old Guard's hopes of regaining control over the party apparatus rested on a decisive drubbing of the errant McGovern.² When Nixon rode to a second term by a landslide, the party regulars moved quickly to restore their power. Within months, they had reversed most of the dissidents' reforms and, by 1974, were again firmly in control.

These events were more than a backdrop for the emergence of two socialist organizations—the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) and the New American Movement (NAM)—they were constitutive. Harrington, whose book *The Other America* had provided the intellectual inspiration for Kennedy and Johnson's War on Poverty, had left the nearly moribund Socialist Party over its refusal to adopt a policy of entryism (a British term) in order to transform the Democratic Party. Emboldened by initial successes, he formed DSOC. One of its main goals was to revive youth activism for a new socialist organization that could spur social reform within the existing system. DSOC organizers perceived that, since the Democratic Party itself was not capable of inspiring a new generation of activists or intellectuals, a new organization was needed that ideologically was positioned somewhere between radicalism and progressive liberalism. Harrington was a self-professed Marxist social theorist; among his publications was an early translation of a chapter of Georg Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness*. Literary critic and social historian Irving Howe, political activist Ruth Jordan, and hundreds of others—including a fraction of "progressive" union leaders like William Wipinsinger, the president of the Machinists' union, and a significant group of UAW, state, county and municipal employees officials and secondary leaders from other unions—signed on to the formation of DSOC. In his more candid moments, Harrington allowed that the organization had no chance, nor desire, to become a genuine third party or even a mass movement. Its influence would remain largely ideological, and its role was to provide cadres for the organizations that constituted the *de facto* progressive wing of the Democratic Party and the progressive unions. It had to deploy a generous amount of "smoke and mirrors" to gain

influence in the national conversation, a tactic that Harrington adopted during his successful effort to influence the Kennedy administration a decade earlier. But DSOC's second function was to hold and educate the large number of students and intellectuals in progressive politics. (I say "hold" because recent national and Democratic Party developments were likely to produce a wave of cynicism among those whose hopes had been dashed by the McGovern campaign's failure and the practical demise of the antiwar movement's mass phase.)

What remained constant was DSOC's conviction that the road ahead was identical to the strategy enunciated by Independent Socialist leader, Max Schachtman, in the 1950s. That strategy was to build a coalition of forces whose center was the labor movement's progressive unions, a coalition that eventually could force a realignment within the Democratic Party. As Harrington and Howe quipped, the strategy was to build a "popular front without Stalinism"—a reference to the immensely successful Communist Party's policy of the late 1930s and the early 1940s to become the catalyst for a left wing within the New Deal Coalition. The McGovern insurgency, if not its campaign, had proven that the Democratic Party machine was vulnerable. DSOC's orientation remained mainly electoral, and its leadership urged its scattered chapters to support vigorously progressive Democratic candidates at the local level. Like almost all progressive organizations, DSOC always found a reason to support the national party ticket. It organized a number of campus chapters which, in addition to electoral campaigns, conducted forums and, in some instances, became involved in campus politics.

Starting the New American Movement (NAM), as the organization was called, was, like DSOC's more mainstream effort, partially a salvage operation. The organizers hoped to maintain some of the incredible energy catalyzed by the New Left and the new social movements and to prepare for the next upsurge. In 1971, James Weinstein, the spirit behind the journal *Socialist Revolution* and the newsweekly *In These Times*, joined with historian and legendary radical anti-Vietnam War leader, Staughton Lynd, to propose the formation of a left democratic socialist organization. The rationale for the new organization was to regroup elements of the New and Old Left who had become demoralized by setbacks suffered after 1968, such as Nixon's victory, the rise of a new Maoist left out of the ashes of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the steep decline of antiwar forces that accompanied the Kent State shootings. At the same time, the post-Stalin Soviet government's brutal reaction to Czech attempts to reform a rigid, unpopular Communist regime further eroded the U.S. Communist party and its sympathizers. Inevitably, after a lifetime of political activism, many reared in the Old Communist Left sought a new home. In short, the Left was in disarray and, unless a new formation appeared, its crisis was sure to deepen.

Weinstein, who, in 1966 had run for Congress as an independent socialist in Manhattan's liberal 19th Congressional district, was a fervent advocate of independent socialist-oriented political action, and a considerable Socialist Party (SP) historian. In several books he ar-

gued that the SP was a genuine force, especially in its heyday before the post-World War I split dictated mainly by the Communist International. Weinstein pointed out that the SP had made important electoral gains in several states, including winning mayoralty and council majorities in some important cities, and elected members of state assemblies and two members to Congress. It also had significant influence in the labor movement. Indeed, the apparel, machinist, brewery, and bakery unions were explicitly socialist. Additionally, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had socialist leanings and leadership, but of the anarcho-syndicalist variety. Weinstein also helped to show how the SP built important social and cultural organizations such as schools, summer camps and insurance programs, some of which were quite important to workers whose employers or unions did not offer health and pension benefits. For the first decade of the twentieth century, the party was a big tent that accommodated a wide variety of perspective, until in 1912, it expelled IWW leader Bill Haywood for advocating violence. Weinstein was inspired in his own campaign by the Socialist refusal to support candidates of either major "bourgeois" party or to form electoral coalitions with them.

In contrast to DSOC, and following Weinstein's lead, NAM would be genuinely independent of the Democratic Party, and would not share the anticommunist legacy of the two main socialist parties that had nurtured many DSOC leaders—the SP itself and the Independent Socialist League. NAM would be a movement of what Weinstein liked to term "ideas." By this he meant it would explicitly adopt a socialist and Marxist perspective on history and current affairs, and aim to put socialism on the national political agenda. This was a position Harrington rejected, but not because he rejected Marxism or socialism. He believed Marxism as organizational ideology would narrow DSOC's base and that it was premature to attempt to make socialism a viable element of the national political landscape.

Lynd, briefly a member of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, was a long-time pacifist and the Freedom Schools' principal during the height of the Southern Civil Rights movement in the mid-1960s. That August, following the unexpected success of the SDS-sponsored April 1965 March on Washington Against the Vietnam War, Lynd organized the Congress of Unrepresented Peoples to continue the momentum generated by the large turnout. From the Congress came the first national antiwar coordination and countless community organizing efforts. Lynd also had been an editorial board member of the journal *Studies on the Left*, which Weinstein had founded in 1959 and edited until its demise in 1967. A historian of the American Revolution, Lynd had been fired from his Yale teaching job, presumably for his political activism, despite a prolific publications record and favorable teaching reviews. Later, he became a labor lawyer and labor movement theorist. Pertinently, Lynd's antiwar activities made him, like Noam Chomsky, one of the more prominent radical public intellectuals when radical public intellectuals were consigned by the media to the conversation's margins. Unlike most intellectuals, though, he was also a genuine movement luminary.

Neither Weinstein nor Lynd was sympathetic to the Soviet Union or China. But they were the progeny of New Left icons like sociolo-

gist C. Wright Mills and the “revisionist” historian William Appleman Williams, who had trained a generation of young radicals at Wisconsin. Thus, they were reared on the anti-anticommunism doctrine that Mills and Williams taught in the late 1950s. At SDS’s inception in 1960, its leaders already were imbued with the belief that anticommunism had been the scourge of the social change’s struggle, even as they allied with the social-democratic League for Industrial Democracy (LID) elders, who at first sponsored their organizing efforts. For this generation, it was never a question of supporting authoritarian regimes or movements. Tom Hayden, who wrote his master’s thesis on Mills, and most SDS activists were anti-communist in their personal views. To be more exact, they regarded the Communist Party U.S.A. as hopelessly “irrelevant,” a judgment not shared by elders such as LID chair Michael Harrington. This difference led to the rupture of their relationship and an antagonism between SDS and the Socialist left. The question for the New Left was “what is the function of anti-communism in American and world politics?” The answer was that, as an ideology, anticommunism was the U.S. foreign policy linchpin and, in Lynd’s words, had pushed some leftists into a “coalition with the marines.”

In 1972, the New American Movement (NAM)—as the organization was christened—held its founding convention. The name signified that the organization would attempt to discover the native roots of radicalism and place itself firmly in American socialist traditions, broadly conceived. While most of its founders were internationalist—after all, they had experienced the antiwar movement—many took seriously Mills’s warning not to put the Soviet Question at the center of their politics.

Shortly after the convention, for different reasons, Weinstein and Lynd left NAM, but the organization survived until 1982. While DSOC claimed 5,000 members in 1983, NAM’s ranks numbered never more than 1,500. The difference was that DSOC had few locals and was largely a paper organization whose main activities were an annual Debs Day dinner and, later, the rebirth of the Socialist Scholars Conference. For more than twenty years, it also organized an annual meeting that attracted some 1,200 to 1,500 participants. NAM, on the other hand, saw itself as a federation, united by an annual conference, educational programs and specific issue campaigns. It was chiefly an organization of chapters inhabited by activists and intellectuals. And, unlike DSOC, whose periphery was as large as its activist core was meager, NAM was an activist organization with a very thin periphery of prominent individuals, and almost no connection with any section of the top labor echelon. Yet a fair number of its adherents were active trade unionists, chiefly in public sector unions and some attained local union office. Its members were almost all degree-holding professionals in education, science, social work and medicine. Almost all were white and many had extensive movement experience in the 1960s, although after NAM got going, it attracted a fair number of recruits who were not veterans of the civil rights, antiwar or feminist movements. [By 1980, NAM had some 1,300 members in 43 chapters throughout the country, many in major cities, among them New York, Chicago, Portland,

Detroit, San Francisco, the Twin Cities, Los Angeles, San Diego, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and others.¹³ Its strongest chapters combined campaigns around local issues (for example, the Twin Cities chapter helped organize a successful coalition to oppose a sports stadium). A good number of the locals organized socialist schools, some of which were little more than extended study groups, but others, like Los Angeles, had an extensive schedule of course offerings.

NAM did not imagine itself to be sufficiently strong enough to constitute any kind of vanguard or catalyst sufficient for igniting a new politics. To the contrary, its modesty was mocked by the many “vanguards” that littered the Left scene. DSOC was a self-conscious analogue to European social-democratic parties that, by the 1950s, had renounced revolutionary objectives but not the aspiration for political power on the basis social reform within capitalism. NAM maintained revolutionary objectives, but understood its function largely in educational terms and, where possible, as participants in resistance to the most egregious policies of mostly local capitalist interests. These positions were not calculated to inspire the kind of enthusiasm—which often slipped into delirium—that, say, the Weather Underground or the Revolutionary Communist Movement (later the Revolutionary Communist Party) did. Both organizations, formed out of the breakup of SDS, confidently declared that the United States was in a “pre-revolutionary” situation, an evaluation that, however delusional, was an enormous magnet to a fraction of young radical idealists. NAM reinforced its sobriety by the fact that its constituents were mostly in their 30s and 40s; it also had a contingent of former communists whose perspectives had been tempered by years of practical activity in labor and social movements as well as in the Democratic Party. And it had a fair number of “red diaper” babies in its ranks who, through their parents’ disappointments, had experienced the demise of the Communist Party and were in no mood for another “party of a new type,” as Lenin had once dubbed the Bolsheviks.

I joined NAM in Southern California in 1976. I had not joined earlier despite my general agreement with its politics because I perceived New York NAM, like many other organizations in that city, to be weak and largely invisible. Consequently, I spent the early 1970s organizing an experimental public high school in East Harlem, taught community college, and tried to perpetuate the 1960s free universities that, for a brief period, lit up the otherwise dismal educational scene. New York NAM was not involved in these projects, and I saw little reason to affiliate with it. In contrast, it seemed that the California chapters were at, or close to, the center of left-wing action, especially in Los Angeles, San Francisco and the East Bay. At that time I lived in San Diego, although I taught social science at UC-Irvine, seventy miles to the North. My first engagement with NAM was as a teacher at the Los Angeles Socialist School whose courses were held at the Unitarian Church, a longtime “progressive” congregation. Its minister had known former Southern California CP chair, now NAM member, Dorothy Healey for decades.

My classes were usually large, a feat that I ascribe to a moment of my three minutes of fame. In 1973, a large commercial publisher

brought out my book on the American working class and its labor movement that was widely read, especially by younger activists. The book was largely responsible for my receiving several job offers, one of which was as a visitor in the Literature Department at UC-San Diego and then a one-year visitor position in Irvine's History Department. I left my New York community college post in the fall of 1976. During that year at Irvine, I was offered a professorship in the Social Science school's Comparative Culture program, and was invited to speak on California campuses and community groups, including NAM chapters, almost from the moment I arrived. When I began teaching at Irvine, it was a short stretch to teach at the L.A. school once a week and attend other functions. When I moved to Laguna Beach in the fall of 1977 for a year, I felt that I was living in the L.A. area, which made participating in L.A. affairs easier. I taught contemporary labor and some social theory courses, particularly focusing on Antonio Gramsci, the Italian theorist, a selection of whose *Prison Notebooks* had been translated into English five years earlier.

Among the more active NAM leaders was Dorothy Healey's son, Richard, who was living in Chicago in the late 1970s. One of Richard's most important contributions to NAM was his key role in organizing a week-long school on the implications of Gramsci's thought for socialist practice. It was held for several years just before the annual national meeting. I was invited to be among the school's lecturers/teachers, and it became an entry into NAM's national leadership. We were attracted to Gramsci's work for many reasons. Of course, for the intellectually curious, Gramsci's range was truly remarkable. *The Prison Notebooks* include writing on education and the intellectuals' role in politics. Similarly, the heightened awareness of blacks' problems in the American South, provoked by the Black Freedom Movement, made Gramsci's writing on the "Southern Question," which concerned the uneven development of Northern and Southern Italy, especially illuminating. There, he discussed what amounted to "internal colonialism" within Italy's borders. Although the analogy to the United States was imperfect, there were enough parallels to grab our attention.

However, while unacknowledged by many readers, one Gramscian value that attracted NAM activists lay in his articulation of socialist strategy for non-revolutionary times. Gramsci wrote the *Notebooks* in the early 1930s while languishing in Mussolini's prisons, and the *Notebooks* considered the eclipse of post-World War communism's revolutionary phase that, by 1922, had given way to the first openly fascist regime. Gramsci's key distinction was between two "wars" in the struggle against capitalism: the war of maneuver and the war of position. The period between 1917 and 1920 was one of the revolutionary struggles for power in Eastern and Central Europe, often by force of arms, and mass workers movements in UK, France, Italy and the United States. Its defeat in all countries except the Soviet Union introduced a period, as Lenin argued, of "temporary capitalist stabilization." Under these conditions, the revolutionary party was obliged to engage in a war of position, by which Gramsci meant a period of building a united front that opposed the current regime, not only engaging in reform struggles but also in

party building, a series of tasks which entailed engaging in the struggle for ideological and cultural “hegemony.” Gramsci defined “hegemony” to mean contesting the prevailing (bourgeois) “common sense.” He argued that rulers’ power lay not chiefly in their command of violent means, but in their capacity to win the underlying population’s consent, a consent propelled by schools, communications media, religion and other informal institutions.

This task, mainly undertaken by intellectuals, elevates the questions of ideology and culture to the forefront and, by implication, rejects versions of revolutionary juvenilia that were as extant in Italy as they were in the United States fifty years later. Gramsci provided us with a theory that anticipated the long haul. What distinguished his perspective from that of those who claimed Lenin’s mantle was his emphasis on the ideological and cultural questions. He also emphasized the need to ally with other institutions—labor, black freedom, feminist and community organizations—also struggling for social reforms. Gramsci argued that no class seeking political power could avoid winning over a substantial section of the intellectuals and making them “organic” to the class. Equally salient was his forceful argument that radical social change is not possible if the prevailing ruling class controls the means by which common sense is produced and disseminated. Thus, provisionally during the war of position, intellectuals occupy a decisive place in the workers’ movement, for their task is to build institutions of “counter-hegemony” to those of the prevailing capitalist power, especially newspapers and other media, and education.

The Gramsci school was a big success and, for many attendees, became the high point of the national convention. On the ground, NAM chapters were varyingly effective in the struggle for hegemony and practical activities. The federated nature of NAM, and its general inability to raise substantial funds to carry on its work, meant that its national center remained relatively weak. For example, it was too small and too poor to put out a periodical, let alone a regular weekly or monthly newspaper, so its publications program—arguably one of the key recruitment strategies for any Left or social movement—was eternally sporadic. This resulted in a rather blurry NAM image, both within the Left and in the broader public sphere. NAM rarely intervened effectively on key national issues; it had no clear voice in either the commercial or the alternative media. Even the several socialist schools it sponsored were almost entirely left to their own devices. Furthermore, the organization never established a clear line with respect to electoral work. In some places, NAM chapters worked with, and for, progressive Democrats; others were inclined toward independent politics but generally lacked the resources to stage a credible electoral campaign, even at the local level. And, while most of its active trade unionists were rank-and-file oriented and harbored deep suspicion of the labor bureaucracy, some worked as full-timers in that bureaucracy and few were part of viable rank-and-file union movements. In sum, even as NAM was fond of the long historical perspective and had a fairly strong aversion to the sectarianism that prevailed in Left circles, it was afflicted with localism—a product of its critique of vanguardism and its organizational

weakness. This provided a certain grayness in its image; its appeal was inevitably limited, especially to a younger generation that sought dramatic, even spectacular, events and personalities to motivate them to action.

But perhaps the main problem was that a significant portion of its leadership was anxious to get on with their lives. Some were getting married and having children; others were, or were on the brink of, returning to graduate school where they would acquire a profession; a third group found or sought jobs in the progressive unions or not-for-profit advocacy organizations in the health, social welfare or peace fields. A few went to work for progressive think tanks. Taken together, to paraphrase Yeats, "the center did not hold." Although things did not exactly fall apart due to centrifugal forces pulling at the organization, the second law of thermodynamics was already in play by about 1980: NAM was leaking energy.

In the early 1980s, prompted by the centrist take-over of the Democratic Party, DSOC showed some signs of radicalization, or at least slowly shed its anticommunist and antiradical legacy. This did not reflect a warming to the Soviet Union or Cuba; this option had long been foreclosed among democratic socialists of all stripes. Having so said, many still had a warm spot for Cuba, largely because of its achievements in education and health care, and also because of its remarkable resistance to U.S. domination, a feat that overshadowed some members' uneasiness concerning the regime's essentially undemocratic nature. But DSOC's key people, especially Harrington and Howe, recognized that significant members' migration away from the CP and the ebbing of the New Left's sectarian wing held some hope for what was once termed "regroupment" of an anti-Stalinist Left. In cities like New York, Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles, NAM and DSOC chapters worked together on projects. In 1979, I returned to New York to take a visiting professorship at Columbia, and while there, renewed my friendship with Bogdan Denitch, a CUNY sociologist who was a national leader of DSOC.⁴ Denitch introduced me to some of the leading New York DSOC folks. In fact, I had a sharp but friendly public debate with Mike Harrington at Columbia regarding whether the Left should support Jimmy Carter's reelection and, more broadly, continue to hope for a Democratic Party realignment. During this period, I began to perceive that the differences between the two organizations had narrowed considerably, except about whether socialists could work in the Democratic Party and whether a segment of the labor bureaucracy had taken a major turn to the Left.

It became clear to me that Harrington was prepared to work with people even to DSOC's left, providing they did not insist on independent electoral politics. Given many of NAM's main cadres' virtual exhaustion, by 1981, talk of merging the two organizations was rife, and each began an informal—and later formal—round of debates regarding the virtues of such a move. By this time, I had been elected to the national committee and was deeply involved in the discussions. From the outset, a relatively small but vocal minority from both organizations was dead set against the merger. DSOC had many leaders were still caught in cold war assumptions. They were

suspicious of the small group of ex-communists who had joined NAM and were worried that NAM was, in general, too "leftist," a term that connoted hostility to liberals and union leaders. At times Harrington, Howe and Denitch had their hands full with these people, because some were fairly prominent in the organization. There were some fears that merger would result in a split. To the right of DSOC was the virulently anti-communist Social Democrats of America led by, among others, AFT president Al Shanker, who was waiting in the wings to pick up some of the pieces.

NAM's opposition was more muted. But a small group who had been members of the Independent Socialists, a Left split-off of the old Independent Socialist League from which Howe, Denitch and Harrington themselves had sprung, vehemently opposed any merger with "social-democrats," especially those who allied with the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy. Even before the merger was agreed upon, most of them had left NAM. Among those who remained, the prospect of merger evoked little enthusiasm; instead, the dominant mood was one of resignation. If DSOC was able to raise funds, sustain a national office and respect local chapter autonomy, this was reason enough to enter into the alliance. Besides, many of us were preparing our exit anyway but, as I indicated already, not so much on ideological grounds as for personal reasons.

In March 1983, in separate conventions, the two organizations agreed to merge, christened the new organization Democratic Socialists of America, and immediately held a joint convention to elect a new leadership. Given the disparity of numbers of members and Harrington's celebrity, he was elected National Chair, and a new national board was chosen that tilted toward DSOC but was generous to NAM. The headquarters were to be in New York, a move that favored DSOC because the NAM chapter was much smaller and the organization's strength was concentrated in the Midwest and the West Coast. In the end, it mattered little. Within a few years, in places where DSOC had been absent or weak, many former NAM chapters no longer existed. In the largest cities such as Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco and Los Angeles where NAM was stronger, DSA had a more ecumenical character. But within a few years, DSA resembled DSOC; smoke and mirrors overcame whatever grass roots pretensions the new organization retained from NAM's heritage. With Harrington's death in 1989, the organization's cache, carefully nurtured by Harrington among left-liberals and union leaders, slowly dissolved. The stark truth was that he was the only socialist political intellectual of national stature on the Left. Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn were surely of equal stature, but they were self-defined tribunes of the peace movement and, like Richard Falk and many others, concentrated their energies almost exclusively on U.S. foreign policy. Harrington's death was followed by a precipitous DSA decline even in its paper membership. In time, what remained of the organization was a scattering of locals, a youth section that ebbed and flowed but was almost invariably on the organization's left. The organization's base was, and remains to this day, a disparate group of notables, a national office that is mainly a fund-raising machine. With little exception, there is no trace of NAM's influence, largely

because the NAM activists, even if they remained members, have moved on. In recent years, DSA has become more skeptical of the Democratic Party and even has some members who criticize the union leadership, but its voice is rarely heard in public life. For all practical purposes, for the last twenty years there has been no public face of the Left except on specific issues. Many still have socialism “in their heart,” but socialism as a politics is nonexistent and the same may be claimed of most of Europe, even if center-left parties retain the term in their title.

Conclusion: What We May Have Learned

The '60s movements drew their breadth from disparate sections of U.S. society—black and white workers, some affiliated to unions, others to the church—intellectuals, countercultural youth and artists, ministry members from different denominations, older folks who had been shoved aside by McCarthyism and, more generally, by the pall of conformity that afflicted our polity. Yet, it is hard to escape the observation that it was the student movement that propelled the civil rights and anti-war movements, if not second wave feminism. By 1970, veteran student activists wondered whether there was political life after the campus. NAM, along with the new communist organizations that arose after 1969, was an attempt to answer to that question. Some had joined the short-lived Movement for a Democratic Society organized by several SDS veterans in the late 1960s; others had been movement activists; a few were scholars and intellectuals who had entered academic life. But, despite some migrants from the Old Left, they were mostly young New Leftists for whom the “Russian” question and all the baggage that came with it were quite beside the point. That most were socialists, at least in belief, had little to do with their day-to-day politics. For all intents and purposes, they shared Harrington’s description of the reformist Left—“The Left Wing of the Possible”—whose salient question was always, “What do we do Monday morning?”

The Reagan era began in 1976 and was reflected in many of the Carter administration’s policies: deregulating trucking and financial institutions; adhering to the neo-liberal welfare policies that Daniel Patrick Moynihan approvingly termed “benign neglect”; staunchly pursuing Cold-War politics signified by a huge arms budget, an aggressive anti-communist foreign policy, and hostility to the Cuban revolution and to revolutionary nationalism in the Middle East and Latin America. While Reagan made these policies into a doctrine and explicitly avowed the death of Communism, the contours were already in place during the Nixon and Carter administrations. These policies constituted the framework of U.S. politics during NAM’s maturation, but the organization devoted little or no attention to these questions. It was, despite its important innovations in radical and socialist education, still enthralled by the more anti-intellectual aspects of movement’s penchant for single-issue politics. That is, it refused to entertain an organizational-wide discussion of fundamental ideological questions such as “What is socialism, and what does its tradition(s) have to do with us?” or “What is the nature of the con-

temporary political conjuncture, and how might it affect our strategy and store of tactics?" Compounding this problem was most of the New Left's and the '60s radicals' resolute refusal to engage Old Left traditions. If they had, we might have had a menu of theoretical, ideological and political issues that any genuine radical organization would have addressed in order to progress.

Now, DSOC was organized by people who had gone through an extensive baptism of socialist and Marxist theory, politics and ideology. They had inherited the best—and the worst—of two distinct lines of thought: that of the Socialist Party with its electoralist fealty to representative democracy, and a strain of neo-Trotskyism, one of whose central precepts was that the fate of the Bolshevik revolution under Stalin defined the boundaries of radicalism. Both strains had been hostile to the New Left for its indifference to Stalinism and for its enthusiasm for the Vietnamese communist revolution. Moreover, DSOC was suspicious of NAM's adherence to principles that the SDS Port Huron Statement termed "participatory democracy" and to consensus-based decision-making concepts that, they believed, easily drifted to more authoritarian forms of organizational process. DSOC viewed many in NAM as both ideologically unschooled and naïve.

The lesson of NAM's demise, as an instance of New Left politics' disappearance—in contrast to the persistent counterculture that still haunts the Right—is that we cannot envisage the renewal of a popular, independent Left political formation that does not take seriously problems of theory and the lessons of history. It must do so both in the wider sense of the histories of capitalism and state socialism, and of the Left at home and abroad. Sad to note, DSA has deteriorated from its DSOC-founders' premises; although in NAM we occasionally disagreed with many of their positions, I always respected the fact that they were considered and not mere prejudices. Today, DSA is a shell of that. Among other reasons for this evaluation is that an organization that is not genuinely critical and intentionally sophisticated will not attract the most able intellectuals and activists. It is too late to ignore the past; many who are dedicated social movement and labor organizers *are* steeped in history and theory, even if there is no general agreement about what we learn from history.

The second major issue is the capacity of a political formation to attract a significant number of 14-to-25-year-olds. I was recruited to a Left youth organization at age 14. It was, of course, as much of a social club as it was a political group. It provided dances every Friday night, threw picnics and beach parties, and was connected to the Jefferson School, a CP-sponsored socialist school that, in different forms, lasted for a quarter century. It survived until the mid-1950s when the party gave up most of its public activities and social and cultural institutions. Young people need a social life as much as "causes" with which to identify and for which to work. NAM never solved the problem of high school and college chapters and suffered for it. When its primarily 30-something membership felt overworked and needed space to pursue other ambitions, the organization was bereft of activists. But the youth question goes beyond practical concerns. It goes to an organization's ability to innovate, to be open to the new, to free itself, at least in part, of old ways of thinking and doing.

Social movements are popular formations that arise from felt needs; NAM, like DSOC was a gathering of intellectuals and activists, many of whom were associated *with* movements but not necessarily of them. NAM was a political association without the pretense of evolving into a party. By “party,” I do not mean an organization in the ordinary American practice—an electoral coalition of diverse social formations. I mean a political formation that intends, at least tendentially, to address and eventually contest power. It need not be Leninist in the sense of serving as a working class vanguard, or for any other revolutionary social category; nor does it necessarily indicate adherence to representative, limited, statist democracy like we have in the United States and other “Western” societies.

In my view, any new party of the Left will draw as much inspiration from the anarchist as from the autonomist Marxist traditions. That is, it might seek a society where the “state” is no longer viewed as part of the solution, but as part of the problem. And it would be resolutely anti-capitalist. This does not mean disdain for social reform’s struggle, but it does indicate deep skepticism, at this point of capitalism’s history, that the reforms associated with the regulation era are still possible. Certainly, such a political formation would fight for popular needs and harbor few illusions, but its program would look forward to the end of the current system of exploitation, alienation and permanent war. It would be a formation that proposed new social relations of the kind much discussed within NAM but rarely made public, and would grow beyond an association of individuals to become a party.

Notes

¹ A veritable liberal takeover of many local Democratic Party clubs reinforced those hopes, especially on the two coasts. The party’s composition changed after Hubert Humphrey’s narrow 1968 defeat as thousands of middle class activists sought to end the war and restore the party to its progressive traditions. By the 1972 Democratic convention, much to the consternation of the Old Guard led by Washington Senator Henry Jackson, Humphrey and a conservative AFL-CIO leadership, the dissidents controlled a majority of the delegates.

² As it turned out, McGovern was complicit in his own rout. McGovern declared his “one thousand percent” support for his vice-presidential choice, Missouri Senator Thomas Eagleton. Yet, when the press revealed that Eagleton had undergone treatment for a serious mental problem, McGovern replaced him in the blink of an eye. Lacking resources, then McGovern made matters worse by conducting a tepid campaign.

³ This information comes from “NAM Chapter Membership, July 1980,” an internal survey conducted by Bill Barclay, NAM’s Political Secretary. —Ed.

⁴ In 1982, Denitch and I initiated a second coming of the Socialist Scholars Conference, an annual event that, in some ways, remains a model of leftist non-sectarianism. The SSC attracted between 1,200 and 1,800 participants in any given year, and it lasted until 2005 when its board members split up. But the conference survives as the Left Forum.

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