

## A capital history of the left's retreat

"Think globally, retreat locally," is a joke slogan I've heard quite a bit up and down the West Coast these past few weeks. It's a line that nicely captures the somewhat ironic pessimism that has seized many radicals three years into the Bush administration, 11 years into the Reagan-Bush era and nearly a quarter of a century from the moment the radical wave peaked in the late '60s.

As that wave began to recede in the '70s and the anti-war movement all too hastily rolled up their maps of Indo-China, "act locally" was the residue. As the right-wing, corporate counter-attack gathered momentum in the middle '70s, the horizons of the left began to shrink to the frontiers of municipalities, county boards of education, city councils and urban water districts.

Radicals began to honeycomb local regulatory and oversight bodies. Sometimes they became indistinguishable from the overseers they replaced, sometimes they remained principled, often indispensable in curbing local police forces, restraining local developers, harassing the Haves in the interests of the Have Nots. But the horizons shrank all the same. Even the broad levels of opposition to the contra war in Nicaragua were most rigorously expressed in movements like Neighbor to Neighbor (a movement started in North Carolina) or in hundreds of Sister City projects.

The momentum in national organizing passed to various segments of the women's movement, to human rights and good citizen bodies like Amnesty International or Common Cause, to environmental organizations like Greenpeace and to consumer movements like those inspired by Ralph Nader, now being drafted for president by a committee taking out advertisements across the country. (I hope he runs.)

Among the younger cohorts of the American left this has led to a narrowing of political and historical focus. At a meeting of mostly Californian local organizers not long ago, I was asked to link local activity with a larger, international left agenda. This being the week during which Lenin statues were being hauled off to the knacker's yard, I said that people should not entirely discount the achievements of "real existing socialism." By way of illustration I pointed out that when the Chinese Communists came to power in 1949 the average life expectancy in China was around 40 years, and as of 1988 was around 70.

A young woman replied that she couldn't see the point of these probably questionable statistics about life expectancy in China nor understand "what help they would be in my organizing." (This remark, I should point out, was made in Los Angeles, where first-year infant mortality statistics have been rising among blacks and Hispanics throughout the Reagan-Bush years, and where such figures have instant meaning among poor people, notably blacks, whose life expectancies trail by several years their white counterparts.)

But this laconic indifference to Chinese mortality figures coexists with a very practical internationalism. Left organizers up and down California and indeed across the United States deal with the consequences of the international division of labor every day of their lives, whether it be a runaway shop moving from \$6-an-hour work in El Norte to \$6-a-day jobs in *maquiladoras* on the Mexican border, or in the form of a

Guatemalan family fleeing the death squads because someone had fingered a family member as a labor organizer.

It's a matter of connecting up energetic local militancy with a sense of left history and national and international left perspective. I remember Studs Terkel once telling me about the lack of a sense of history among some young folk he'd been talking to. The subject had been the working day. "The working day you folks take for granted, a century ago people were giving their lives for that," he'd growled at unknowing youth.

After the funeral orations for communism, we need a new, optimistic vision for the left, not just for the future but for our past. Arguments can be made for a view of this century as having been one of enormous advance for the program of the left: democratic and human rights, the social safety net, wages and conditions of work, education, health care, the rights of women and of ethnic and other minorities, the defeat of fascism and the end of colonialism... all these have been gains fought for and won by the left. Is the defeat of Soviet-style Communism not more than a mere blip in these bigger trends?

The undoubted victories listed above were mostly extorted from capital in the teeth of the latter's vehement opposition, but in the end they were also victories for rational capitalists. In other words the function of the left has often been to save capital from itself and its inherently base tendencies. A better educated work force was a more efficient work force; the admission of women into the work force meant a widening and cheapening of the labor pool; a better paid work force was one that could buy more commodities. Whose cause was being advanced? The spreading of a social safety net meant a measure of security for workers, but also the subsidizing of capitalists' low wages by government. By the middle '50s the white North American working class had won enormous gains, in terms of housing, education, work time, pensions, union representation and political clout. But productivity agreements of the late '40s and '50s came at the expense of input by labor into decision-making or workplace democracy. The tremendous victories of the civil rights movement must similarly be set within a perspective of capitalist rationality. On the one hand there was the fact of black people being able to go to the polls without being murdered; on the other, their entry into the industrial work force again meant a widening of the labor pool and a cheapening of the cost of labor. Whose was the victory?

Time and again there has been a fork in the road. One path has led down to barbarism in the form of fascism, the rule of capital without let or hindrance, ferocious colonial exploitation; the other path led up toward the mitigation of injustice, inequality and oppression. Time and again labor has forced capital toward that second path and then heard capital slap itself on the back for having adopted the course of virtue.

By the late '60s it looked as though the momentum of labor and of progressive ideas against capital was solidly in the ascendant. Vietnamese resistance overseas went hand in hand with apparent ideological weakness on the part of capital at home. One or other of the newsweeklies ran a cover at that time on William Buckley, "the

## ASHES & DIAMONDS

By Alexander Cockburn

last conservative?" But within five years capital was staking out a new road to the lower depths, and—amid a crisis in profitability—a violent assault on the gains of the postwar period.

Capital in this renewed guise was infinitely more sophisticated than in its earlier assaults. Since 1973, real wages in the U.S. have been going down; the working day has been steadily lengthening; social safety nets have been torn; inner city funding eroded; public education hollowed out by attrition in federal and state funding. The conditions of production have grown steadily more wretched, as capital's regulators nullify workplace standards. Above all, the cost of labor has been reduced as capital has whipsawed one sector against another, reducing the entire labor force toward a mobile, part-time, non-unionized entity. To take one index: job classifications in one GM-Japanese auto plant have sunk from 16 to 3.

This has been paralleled by a far greater flexibility and versatility of capital in its international motions than in previous epochs, even as extraction from the Third World continues at a delirious pace, with Africa and Latin America exporting capital to the First World, while living standards in those continents plunge downward.

At this fork in the road the path downward is being worn into a superhighway. The left is entirely on the defensive, either split into discrete interest groups or defending minimal liberal programs that 25 years ago it was deriding as the bookends of

Keynesian capitalism. A left movement has to offer more than this: it has to think on a local but also on a national and global scale. On the national level the left has to argue a case it has virtually let go by default for twenty years: the social control of investment, the "socialization" of the market, in which democratic investment planning represents the popular will, as against the corporate drive for profitability.

As James O'Connor, editor of *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, recently remarked, "global capitalist development since World War II would have been impossible without deforestation, air and water pollution, pollution of the atmosphere... and the other ecological disasters... If global capital had bothered to reproduce or restore the conditions of production as these presented themselves at the end of the post-World War II reconstruction period, world GNP rates probably would have been only a fraction of recorded rates."

Further defining eco-socialism O'Connor says, "At the level of interests, all social movements, insofar as we regard them as fighting for something material (including the materiality of the body), implicitly raise the same demand, or 'secretly' have the same political goal—to make the state more responsive... The point is to put democratic content into the democratic forms or democratic procedures of the bourgeois liberal state... Nor is the point to reform liberal democracy, to make it work better, because reform in this sense means merely to make democratic procedures or forms work better in their own terms, without attacking the undemocratic or laissez-faire content of the liberal state... I add quickly that by 'state' I also mean international state bodies such as the IMF."

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Citadel Underground...Challenging Consensus Reality Since 1990



**Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s**  
By Barbara Epstein  
University of California Press  
327 pp., \$24.95

By Peter Siskind

**W**HEN DAWN BROKE ON MAY Day, 1977, 2,400 protesters illegally occupying the proposed site of the Seabrook nuclear-energy plant rose to find the National Guard encircling their makeshift camp. Orders were issued: anyone not off the plant's grounds in 20 minutes would be arrested. A long environmental movement's rapid growth was confirmed that morning when more than 1,400 people chose jail rather than evacuate. It had been less than a year since a group of 18 had staged the first direct action opposing the plant's construction in the New Hampshire coastal town. The publicity from the group's May Day protest eventually brought the Clamshell Alliance throngs of new adherents to its strategy of nonviolent direct action.

But success changed the equation. Never again would the Seabrook gates be conveniently left open. Next time, the only way to occupy the site would be for protesters to admit themselves forcibly by cutting fence wire and confronting awaiting police. According to many Clamshell members, though, such tactics contradicted the values of nonviolence, which, along with other principles such as decision-making by consensus, had emerged as vital priorities for the Alliance since its inception. The alternatives for the next protest were clear: take the efficacious political action and forcibly occupy the site or stick to a valued set of principles and seek another, as yet unknown, means of protest.

**The Movement and The Stasis:** How this episode resolves itself is one of several telling moments that Barbara Epstein recalls in *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution*, her history of the American nonviolent direct action movement in the '70s and '80s. Epstein illuminates the movement's character and describes the strategies and philosophy that alternately put it at odds with establishment interests and would-be political allies. For the Clamshell, this meant a majority of members opposed fence-cutting while a vocal minority supporting such action stood ready to block any group consensus.

Months of indecision and political inactivity followed until the state attorney general publicly offered a solution. He proposed that the group hold a demonstration on the site, but only on a prearranged date and with the guarantee that all protesters leave the site at a designated time. Many Clamshell members on both

## Politics: pro and consensus

sides of the nonviolence debate thought this offer unacceptable, but a self-appointed set of leaders who approved the plan forced their view upon the rest of the group.

A stunning 20,000 people attended the demonstration in June 1978, but the local movement was crumbling. Each of the factions was disillusioned. Pro-fence cutters were so disgusted by the concession to government that they split to form a new, short-lived group. And non-violence advocates' anger at unelected leaders' effective abridgment of the consensus decision-making process moved many more to drop out of the Clamshell. The strategy of direct site occupation proved incapable of stopping construction plans. With its momentum gone, the Clamshell soon died and the Seabrook plant was built.

**Participatory glories:** The principal characters in *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution* are those in the Clamshell and similar groups who, as the book's title suggests, emphasize cultural change—revolution is perhaps too ambitious a word—as the primary means to political restructuring. For these individuals, a traditional political goal such as stopping a nuclear plant's construction is secondary to the collective process—to maintaining the egalitarian and democratic community values that have developed within the group.

This concern is manifested in an internal structure developed to ensure individual participation: every member of an organization like the Clamshell belongs to an affinity

group with about a dozen other members. Each affinity group reaches consensus decisions on issues concerning direct action tactics and broader strategy and sends a spokesperson, appointed on a rotating basis, to the "spokescouncil" to convey this decision. Composed of all the affinity group spokespersons,

**ORGANIZING** the spokescouncil operates in a manner similar to its related association: consensus must be reached on all decisions; any individual can block the judgment of the rest of the representatives.

*Political Protest and Cultural Revolution's* best anecdotal passages tell of the benefits of such participatory politics. Recalling the sense of community fostered by the affinity group system, some describe their experiences in the direct action movement as no less than "magical" and "utopian." A support camp set up to assist more than 2,000 Abalone Alliance protesters in their two-week blockade of the Diablo nuclear plant in California in 1981 drew starry-eyed praise from even experienced organizers.

Recalling the camp's town meet-

**Movement, stasis and the contradictions of consensus democracy.**

ings and community kitchen, one participant said, "It took enormous organizing and fundraising to create that city, but when you got there it seemed so easy, a self-supporting, mutualistic community. ... I felt, this is a way I could live." So strong was the sense of community among the blockaders that its infectious spirit spread beyond the boundaries of the camp: a nurse at the local hospital secretly offered free medical supplies to a bleeding protester; an overworked policeman, exhausted from 36 hours of constant duty, smiled compassionately, expressing respect for his handcuffed prisoner's commitment and nonviolence.

**Swallowing dissent:** Clearly Epstein is sympathetic to those who place culture before politics, but she isn't uncritical of them either. The great paradox of the direct action movement is that its utopian attempt to conflate process and goal generates as many problems as it overcomes. The affinity group structure exists to give each person a meaningful part in the decisions of the whole. But as the Clamshell's demise shows, in a pinch, democracy sometimes takes a back seat to the ambitions of self-appointed leaders.

In this situation and others, a tremendous pressure weighs down on dissenting individuals to conform to the group's views. One veteran organizer describes this as the "politics of niceness":

"It was difficult, under these conditions, to have a simple principled argument. People who argued strongly would be condemned for not being nice, not for whether their ar-

gument was right or wrong." In any thing but a small and homogenous group, the difficult task of reaching consensus threatens to breed a deep strain of anti-intellectualism.

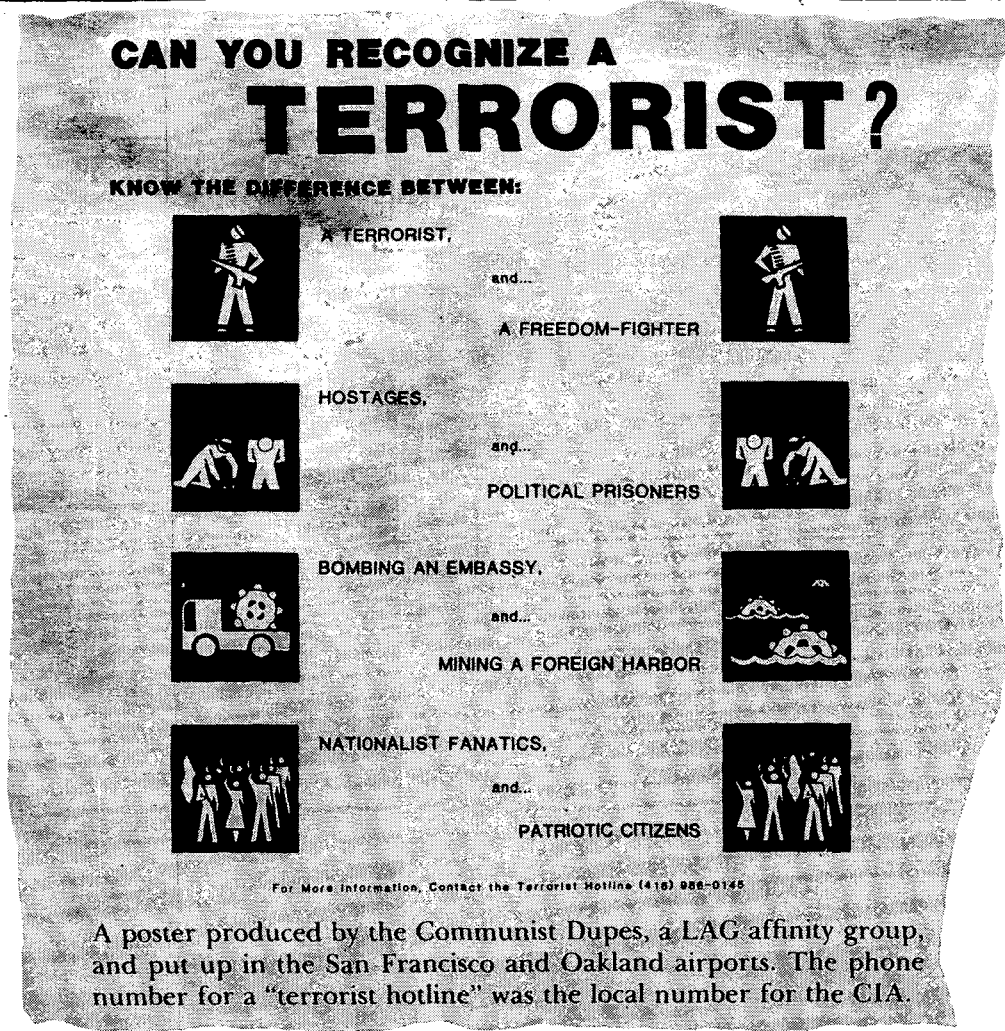
Direct action groups' emphasis on community over political effectiveness also belies a tension within the idyll. The benefits of a harmonious community are undeniable, but tangible political issues are what originally draw people together. Thus direct action groups deflect attention from the concerns to which they owe their existence and prospective future.

Such a destabilizing contradiction plays itself out in the story of the Livermore Action Group (LAG). LAG developed a strong sense of community in the course of several well-attended acts of civil disobedience against a local nuclear research facility associated with the University of California. But the protest, not-surprising failure to achieve the ultimate goal of closing the facility left several members, including Epstein herself, wanting to expand the organization's tactics to include education of and outreach to local residents as well as legal demonstrations with other like-minded groups. The majority of LAG members believed that civil disobedience was the only valid vehicle for protest, the ineffectiveness of more conventional means being the movement's inspiration in the first place. This majority blocked the proposal to diversify strategy; but left with only one, incomplete political tactic, LAG (community and all) soon languished and dissolved.

**Participant historian:** It is hard to determine exactly what legacy Epstein sees the nonviolent direct action movement leaving behind. The illuminating insights of *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution* often emerge at unpredictable and ineffectual moments. Rather than informing the whole book and lending cohesion to her work, much of Epstein's best analysis seems patched into the text, damaging the impact of her ideas and the drama of her narrative. One moment she'll offer a glowing, romantic portrait of a direct action group's collective mission, and then go on at length to describe the same group's fundamental flaws and deficiencies.

To account for such contradictions, a glimpse of Epstein's outlook is found in the frequent portrayal of herself as a participant in the direct action movement as well as its historian. The photograph on the back cover shows Epstein smiling proudly as policemen escort her away, under arrest, from a demonstration in San Francisco. From this perspective, it seems that salvaging the movement from the long list of compelling stories that have been forgotten and neglected is at least as important to her as recording an authoritative history.

A more sophisticated account than Epstein's would have to come to terms with a variety of questions upon which *Political Protest and Cul-*



Political Protest and Cultural Revolution