

## **“When the Revolution Came”**

**A Review of Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che*. New York: Verso, 2002.**

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During the early 1980s I was part of a disciplined Marxist organization which tried to understand the difficulties and contradictions of working as a revolutionary organization in a hegemonic power where the conditions for revolution did not exist. As a child of the 1960s Black Power movement, I had long been convinced of the notion that we took from Kwame Nkrumah and Lin Biao that as the revolutionary third world liberated their territories from the yoke of capitalism and imperialism, revolutionary conditions would come to exist in the capitalist metropole, even in the belly of the beast, the fabled jewel of liberal capitalist civilization, the United States of America. In hindsight this vision of revolutionary change was not much different from the “long march” position held by much of the post-1968 New Left. Years later after our organization had dissolved, I asked my old comrades how this 1980s debate within our organization had been resolved since I had been relocated to the East Coast before the debate was concluded. No one seemed to know. So I was quite shocked to find the answer to my question in Max Elbaum’s new book, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che* (Verso, 2002).

I say this as a testament to the brilliance and thoroughness of Max Elbaum’s new book which is the first book about the sixties upheaval to provide us with a serious analysis of the post-1968 New Left, focusing on those who saw the need to build a new communist party to replace the “revisionist” CPUSA. Max Elbaum has performed a

service of immense value to all of us by using his formidable analytical skills to fill the extensive gaps in our knowledge about this very important period in our history. In doing so he has challenged the attempt to dismiss this period from our attention by the use of the facile “good sixties/bad sixties” framework that one finds in the work of many scholars of the New Left (including those who were formerly activists). This framework has looked favorably upon the SNCC and SDS of the early 1960s, whose cadre were humane, sensible, and worthy of emulation. Those scholars mostly denounced the excesses of the post-1968 New Left who they held had turned to violence, irrationalism, Black Power, anti-Americanism, third worldism, and radical feminism. They further argued that the excesses of the post-1968 New Left shattered the left liberal coalition which had won a societal consensus for an inclusive and social democratic program which held great promise for all Americans. In their view this “Bad New Left” gave us the conservative backlash: George Wallace, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush.

Elbaum’s work is a substantive and powerful corrective to this myth. He correctly locates the evolution of the post-1968 New left within the context of popular mobilizations for justice and equality for people of color, women, and gays and lesbians; for an end to America’s war against the people of Vietnam; for an end to the blockade against Cuba; and for support of the anticolonial struggle in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. “All society was a battleground” argues Elbaum in the opening pages of the book (p. 2). The revolutionary fervor of this period stemmed in part from their all important recognition “that the power of the oppressed was on the rise and the strength of the status

quo was on the wane.” (p. 2). In early 1971 polls reported that upwards of 3 million people thought a revolution was necessary in the United States (p. 2).

But this statistic will be no less astounding for the post-1960s generation than to learn the central appeal of Third World Marxism to these young rebels. This may indeed seem a powerful anomaly for a generation attuned to the vicissitudes of a political culture nourished within the womb of a devastating class and culture war against the “minority poor.” But Elbaum’s great achievement is to demonstrate that the logic of the post-1968 Left fit perfectly into the most emancipatory visions of the American creed, the last shall be first, etc. Within U.S. borders the heroes of the post-1968 Left included SNCC, RAM, Black Panther Party, League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Young Lords Party, American Indian Movement, and La Raza Unida. Outside the U.S. their role models included the anticolonial and socialist revolutionaries in the Vietnam, Cuba, China, Algeria, Angola, and Mozambique. Elbaum demonstrates that during the 1970s the line of descent from the civil rights movement seemed clear, and thus the centrality of opposition to racism and imperialism to the grievances of these rebels. This spectacular and unforeseen rebellion was accompanied by a kind of revolutionary euphoria based on the pace of change which they witnessed and thus the anticipation of certain victory. This mood which Elbaum readily captures clashed with the more cautious approach of the old Left. But Elbaum’s sensitivity to and ability to convey the depth of the oppositional mentalities of that time may also illuminate important discontinuities with the more moderate and conservative tenor of the post-1980s political culture.

Elbaum is at his best in showing at every turn the logic of revolutionary thought. He explains that the rise of a revolutionary current in the United States attuned to the

influence of Third World Marxism stems in part from the demographic significance of a lower working class composed disproportionately of people of color who have waged courageous struggles to transform America into a more just, democratic, and egalitarian society for all. On the other side of the coin, the policing function of the United States as the hegemonic power of the world-system, brought us into regular conflict with Marxist led national liberation movements in the third world whose moral authority often inspired idealistic youth to make common cause with them against the obvious immorality of their own government.

Scholars of the New Left have tended to dismiss the internationalism of the movement as youthful immaturity and rebelliousness. But Elbaum contends such arguments constitute a retreat from a systemic critique of U.S. economic and political structures, misleading its exponents to pose their own “complacency” as maturity. This retreat, he argues makes it difficult for them to understand the depth of grassroots enthusiasm for revolutionary politics that existed during the period from 1968 to 1973 . Periods of intense conflict can alter people’s conception of what is possible and desirable, but in more normal times it may seem out of bounds to take seriously the prospect of building a U.S. radical movement that is antiracist and in solidarity with the third world.

While Elbaum is impressed by the courage, integrity, and audacity of the young revolutionaries who challenged the colossus with the most effective tools at their disposal, he does not at all shirk from criticism of the post-1968 New Left. So this work restores this history in all of its fullness, so that we all may reflect more effectively on this period. He gives us a wonderfully detailed story and captures both the language and the sensitivity of the times. So if your history of the New Left ends with the implosion

of SDS into Weatherman (later called the Weather Underground), and a number of other anti-American sects, and the turn of SNCC to Black Power, you must read this book.

Instead of visualizing 1968 as the end of the 1960s, Elbaum tells us the story about a quite amazing period in U.S. history, when seemingly an entire generation attempted to manifest the integrity, courage, and intelligence of their foremost heroes: Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Fannie Lou Hamer. As they struggle for racial justice and against imperialist war they add another set of heroes which include V.I. Lenin, Mao Zedong, Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Fidel Castro, and Che Guevara.

Max Elbaum tells the story of the post-1968 period in a far different voice than we have heard heretofore. He is overwhelmed by the democratic spirit of the common people who are rebelling against the injustices of our society and their place in it. By the fall of 1968, he points out, one million students saw themselves as part of the Left, and 368,000 people agreed on the need for a mass revolutionary party. Among African Americans he argues revolutionary sentiments contended not just for influence, but for pre-eminence, especially among those under 30, as more than 300 rebellions flared up among inner city Blacks from 1964-1968.

He reminds us that Nixon's brutal invasion of Cambodia in May 1970 led to the largest explosion of protest on U.S. college campuses in our history. Four out of ten college students, nearly three million people thought that a revolution was necessary in the United States. Business Week lamented: "The invasion of Cambodia and the senseless shooting of four students at Kent State University in Ohio have consolidated the academic community against the war, against business, and against government. This is

a dangerous situation. It threatens the whole economic and social structure of the nation.” (p. 18-19).

In this way Elbaum establishes clearly the social context within which a “determined” sector of the New Left turned to Third World Marxism and then to Marxism-Leninism. While he covers the split in SDS and the evolution of powerful radical forces within Weatherman and RYM II, he also looks at the evolution of the Puerto Rican Left through the Young Lords, El Comite, and the Puerto Rican Socialist Party. These organizations won tens of thousands to revolutionary politics in the 1970s (p. 78), making Leninism the dominant perspective on the Puerto Rican Left. He argues that while third world liberation movements had a powerful influence on all left moving youth, for those with powerful communist movements in their homelands, community formation itself was linked to the deepening of a radical sensibility. The Third World strikes at San Francisco State and Berkeley he says were crucial in the evolution of Asian American radicalism. While cultural nationalism was a strong feature of Chicano organizations such as the Brown Berets, Marxism was the dominant perspective within CASA, which did not distinguish between Mexicans born north of the border and those born south of the border. Marxist ideas also were established within the Native American movement. Of course the story of Black radicals is by now familiar as most people know some of the histories of the Black Panther Party, the League of Black Revolutionary Workers, and SNCC.

But the main contribution of this book is the detailed story of that section of the post-1968 New Left who decided that the most urgent task to overcome the weaknesses of the sixties movement was to build a new communist party to replace the “revisionist”

CPUSA. It traces the histories of the Revolutionary Union (now the Revolutionary Communist Party), the October League (later the Communist Party (M-L), and the Communist League (later the Communist Labor Party, and now the League of Revolutionaries for a New America). He tells the story of the I Wor Kuen, the August Twenty-Ninth Movement, and the Revolutionary Communist League (formerly the Congress of African People) who eventually merged to form the U.S. League of Revolutionary Struggle. It tells the story of the evolution of the Black Workers Congress which split into a number of smaller groups. It tells us of the Revolutionary Workers League, which stemmed from the merger of People's College, Malcolm X Liberation University, and the Youth Organization for Black Unity. RWL would later establish powerful links with the Young Lords Party offshoot the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization to form the short lived Revolutionary Wing. It tells us of the Workers Viewpoint Organization which stemmed from the Asian Study Group and later became the Communist Workers Party which incorporated a significant number of cadre from the Revolutionary Workers League. It tells us the story of the Union of Democratic Filipinos who would later unite with members of the Third World Women's Alliance, and the Northern California Alliance to form Line of March. It tells us some history of the Democratic Workers Party a party founded by women, and of the Sojourner Truth Organization which had a quite different orientation to revolutionary organization than most of the organizations in the "New Communist Movement," looking more to C.L.R. James, Gramsci, and Du Bois than Mao.

In addition to historical sketches of organizations, Elbaum explains the various tendencies in the New Communist Movement and the logic of their plans for building a

new antirevisionist party. He constantly interrogates the usefulness of the concept of antirevisionism as propagated by the Chinese Communist Party. He is critical of this concept but attributes its salience to the influence of Maoism which tended to promote ultra-leftism and dogmatism within the New Communist Movement. At the same time the foreign policy of the CPC promoted an alliance with U.S. imperialism as a lesser danger than Soviet hegemonism. A sure recipe for schizophrenia. This is certain to be a controversial section of the book that will lead to much debate since even Mao Zedong cautioned that revolutionaries in other countries must operate according to their own conditions and not tail after any other party.

Although anti-revisionism was the source of the attempts of the New Communist Movement to transcend what they viewed as the reformist limitations of the CPSU and the CPUSA, Elbaum shows that this theoretical stance frequently led its adherents to dogmatism and left opportunism. While the earliest members of the party building movement mostly agreed on an antirevisionist stance, they mostly disagreed about how one went about building a new party. Some emphasized building the struggle, consciousness, and revolutionary unity of the working class, others held the unity of Marxist-Leninist around political line to be key, some emphasized the need for Communists to unite with “advanced workers.” Some used various combinations of these strategies. Despite these different approaches, the early history of the party building movement was typified by innovation, free-wheeling discussion, and trial runs with a variety of organizational approaches. This early promise was undermined, Elbaum argues by “a quest for Marxist orthodoxy “which led to a series of dead ends (p. 162).

For the most part Elbaum's analysis of this complex array of movements is as clear as a bell, all the more commendable because these movements are so numerous and complex. He locates the pervasive "voluntarism" of the movement in its 1960s sensibility that history always moved fast, "and that they could make it move faster with enough dedication and right ideas"(p. 164). He also locates a source of voluntarism in the much of the movements adherence to a Maoist framework (which also promotes ultra-leftism and dogmatism) rather than seeing "cultural revolution Maoism" as itself a part of the New Left, and thus as a part of the critique of the Old Left.

The zeal of the movement was a double edged sword. It often led to impatience with those who were unable to make a 24-hour commitment and thus contributed to rigidity and intolerance. Once the movement was no longer the center of grassroots mobilization, the zeal of the cadre tended to enclose them in a self-contained and distorted world. But on the whole the movements culture often enabled individuals to transcend their weaknesses, to challenge their prejudices, and to engage in audacious interventions into the life of their communities and the wider social world. People strove to sink roots into the working class, and many took fighting racism and sexism within their personal lives quite seriously-although in my view the movement was much more serious about fighting racism than sexism. An element of left wing anti-feminism pervaded the movement.

The New Communist Movement reached its peak in 1973-74 with several national organizations, dozens of local organizations, and the Left's largest-circulation newspaper (*The Guardian*). Recession and then economic restructuring followed the long postwar boom, decimating the social sectors upon which the New Communist Movement

had pinned its hopes and strategies. Movement activists did not immediately comprehend that they were in the midst of an overall shift in their historical situation but saw a series of difficulties which they must face piecemeal.

The movement began to fragment over how they understood racism, the appropriate strategy to oppose racism, relations between activists of color and white activists within organizations, relations between primarily white organizations and organizations made up primarily of people of color, what attitude to take toward nationalist strategies among organizations made up of people of color, and indeed whether one framed this question as a “national question” or a question of national minorities, or of an oppressed race. But these doctrinal issues did not necessarily define one's position on any given issue, such as the Boston busing crisis where organizations sometimes clashed bitterly.

Party building became the key tasks for almost all of the groups during this period. But since the mass movement which had surged in 1970-73 were now ebbing, emphasis on purism and orthodoxy became the emphasis within much of the movement. Elbaum dubs this “miniaturized Leninism.” The Revolutionary Union, it was argued, had become corrupted by its initial emphasis on building the mass movement. What was needed was close study of the classic works of Marxism-Leninism, including the theory of party building. Elbaum credits the Proletarian Unity League, the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee, El-Comite-MINP, the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP), and the Third World Women's Alliance with resisting this trend toward dogmatism and purism.

By mid-1975, Elbaum argues, a movement beset by “Maoist fundamentalism” and internecine conflict was split down the middle by the decision of the Chinese to side with the U.S. and South Africa against the MPLA in Angola (which was backed by the USSR and Cuba). Elbaum traces the evolution of Chinese doctrine in its shifting international line and its eventual designation that capitalism had been restored in the USSR. While the Soviets continued to regard China as socialists they criticized “the CPC leadership as petty bourgeois nationalists and ultra lefts who were splitting the communist movement and objectively supporting imperialism.” (p. 211).

While Elbaum earlier indicated some grasp of the voluntarist streak running through the New Left generation, he constantly pillories the Maoists whose voluntarism, he argued, stacked the deck in favor of ultra-leftism and purism. Elbaum locates this error in Mao Zedong’s slogan that “The correctness or incorrectness of the ideological line and political line decides everything.” (p. 238). Maoism was the main error of the New Communist Movement, an error eschewed during the second round of party building when a number of non-Maoist and anti-Maoist forces came to the fore. A number of books were published which were critical of the thesis that capitalism had been restored in the Soviet Union. An anti-dogmatist, anti-revisionist trend emerged which eventually constituted about 20 local organizations into an Organizing Committee for an Ideological Center (OCIC). The Tucson Marxist-Leninist Collective commenced publication of *Theoretical Review* which promoted perspectives associated with Charles Bettelheim, Nicos Poulantzas, Louis Althusser, and Antonio Gramsci. The Democratic Workers Party emerged with a non-dogmatic analytic framework based on the works of Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank, and Harry Braverman (but had

an ultra-centralist organizational culture). Finally the Rectification Network was founded by KDP leaders Bruce Occena and Melinda Paras, TWWA leader Linda Burnham, and Northern California Alliance leader Max Elbaum.

The Rectification Network eventually became Line of March which contended mostly with the U.S. League of Revolutionary Struggle throughout most of the late 1980s. By that time most of the organizations of the New Communist Movement had ceased to exist. By the end of the 1980s both Line of March and LRS were among the last of the organizations of the New Communist Movement to pass from the scene, leaving the Revolutionary Communist Party, Communist Labor Party (now called League of Revolutionaries for a New America), and the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (which includes the former Proletarian Unity League). There is also the Committee in Solidarity with El Salvador (CISPES), a category of organization that is not dealt with in any serious way in this study.

This is an excellent book. It is balanced, comprehensive, analytic, and sophisticated. It represents the input of many activists from that period. I could not recommend it more. But there is still much to do on this topic. I think there is a need for a deeper understanding of Maoism. Elbaum tends to equate Maoism only with the harsh methods of the cultural revolution and not its democratic ideals. He also associates Maoism with following Chinese foreign policy. Others have used the term China Liners and Soviet Liners for those groups who tended to follow the foreign policy of either of these great powers. Perhaps those terms are also too harsh, and we should just say that this manner of following a leading party is not a model for the kind of international solidarity which has to be at the heart of any attempt to create a democratic, egalitarian,

and just *world* order. Although all socialist movements have utilized a two-stage strategy in which one first takes state power and then transforms the world, once one takes state power one is faced with the issue of survival in a world which is still capitalist.

While small socialist states may be forced to align themselves with the most powerful of the socialist states, China's position was different. In my estimate Maoism was a revolutionary and democratic ideology, which stood with the peasants in Chinese society. But in the end China took its own path to modernization and survival in the capitalist world-economy, not to revolutionary transformation. Maoism was defeated. For the time being the party organization was needed to defend the revolution, but it was also the source of class relations within the society. Maoism's attack on the party and on the "capitalist roaders" undermined the stability of Chinese society since the cultural revolution did not yield viable political institutions to replace the party. Mao Zedong viewed the defeat as temporary, arguing that they would need many cultural revolutions. But does this trap us in the prism of our old framework where we substitute the party for the revolutionary classes because they are not *yet* strong enough to rule in their own right?

There is yet another reason, largely biographical, that I am somewhat sensitive about an attack on Maoism. Maoism has exerted a tremendous attraction for people of color who have been victims of racist humiliation in the Pan-European world, especially in the United States. For many of us Maoism stood with the "wretched of the earth." This was a conscious stand which did not flow simply from defining oneself as a Marxist, nor from being a revolutionary in the third world. It seemed to most of us that Maoism expressed both our desire for a just, democratic, and egalitarian world and it recognized

the more subtle humiliations which reinforced the sense of pan-European supremacy among all sectors of the population. After the murder of Malcolm X, it was the Maoist Revolutionary Action Movement who called most of us onto the revolutionary path. We also recalled that Fanon had said that when the native hears the European talk about culture he reaches for his knife. This is difficult territory, I know, but we must negotiate it successfully if we are to move forward.

Despite the above reservation or two, Elbaum's more important point should not be lost. While the self-designation "New Communist Movement" was intended to distinguish it from the "revisionist" CPUSA, this movement was a part of the world Left. Elbaum's enormously successful achievement is to have restored for us this part of our collective history, not as a historical oddity, but as a continuation of the historical strategy of the Left (which includes SNCC, SDS, Malcolm X, and the CPUSA). He shows that the collapse of most elements of the New Communist Movement during the 1980s and early 1990s was part and parcel of the larger crisis of the strategy of the world Left.

I would only ask for more consistency on this point. Can we say that "Maoist organizations" were doomed because of a profound misassessment of how ripe capitalism was for defeat in the U.S? In 1848 Marx and Engels thought the spectre of communism haunted Europe. Lenin talked about moribund capitalism during World War I. Interestingly, it was Mao who argued that revolution was not an event but a process which covered a long historical period of transition from capitalism to communism, including the socialist states who were still creatures of the capitalist world. We all need a more sophisticated understanding of what Fernand Braudel calls "the plurality of social

time.” This seems part and parcel of a tendency to confuse periods of economic stagnation which is a part of the cyclical rhythms of the capitalist system, and structural crisis, which is a part of the evolution and undoing of the system. We need to pay more attention to these distinctions and employ them in our strategies for creating a world that is substantively more democratic, egalitarian, and just.

This is perhaps a minor quibble in my view with a truly superb work of scholarship which raises all of the right questions about our need to question our understanding of social transformation; to examine the historical record of the reform versus revolution debate; our understanding of the functioning of the capitalist world-economy and its historical trajectory and thus of the possibilities of social transformation. We may therefore understand the widespread view of 1968 as the demise of the reasonable left, because it marked the beginning of the collapse of the liberal center. We might better appreciate 1968 as the beginning of the long structural crisis of capitalism without the lure of liberal reformism as a stabilizing force. But they should not be expected to pass from the scene quietly. They have and will continue to fight back ruthlessly and sometimes murderously because they understand the stakes. We should view this period as the first battle in a long struggle to create a *world* that is substantively more democratic, egalitarian, and just. We are indebted to Max Elbaum for providing us with a thought-provoking, insightful, and analytically elegant analysis of this struggle and the lessons that we might draw for the struggles that are surely to come.