Carl Oglesby: New Left Intellectual

written by George Fish | October 10, 2011

Carl Oglesby, the eloquent, bespectacled former president of the original Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) of the 1960s, died Tuesday, September 13, 2011, at his home in New Jersey. He was 76, and had been suffering from lung cancer. Oglesby was one of the New Left's most articulate spokespersons, a fierce, scholarly critic of the Vietnam War and an insightful student of how the U.S. ruling class functioned. In numerous speeches across the country, Oglesby articulated both the moral concern and the politics of SDS and the New Left to thousands upon thousands, his eloquence, scholarly research, and urgent advocacy setting him apart from both the action-oriented SDSers who cared little for theory or even intellect, and from the dissociated left academics who confined themselves more to abstraction in the classroom and the scholarly journal or book. Oglesby was a public intellectual in that positive sense of having something to say to the ordinary person, and wanting actively to say it to such a person; and in his ability to say it well and be impressively informed on it. He was one of the true New Left intellectuals who emerged in the 1960s.

As befits an intellectual, Carl Oglesby left behind a notable "paper trail" of speeches and books. In 1967's *Containment and Change* he laid out the challenge of the New Left to Cold War liberals who, despite their Establishment credentials as the "best and the brightest," had come to disaster facing Vietnamese peasants fighting a guerilla war that stymied U.S. military might; in the *Yankee and Cowboy War* he argued that the outwardly liberal politicians and intellectuals of the American Establishment, situated geographically and symbolically on the East Coast, were being challenged for leadership by an increasingly vocal and powerful right wing funded by oil money and defense contractors based in the West and Midwest, an analysis quite prescient of what was later to come; and as editor of 1969's *New Left Reader*, he presented a collection of articles from those who were active in, and who inspired, the New Left of the 1960s. In 2008 he published his memoir of the 1960s, *Ravens in the Storm*, one of the most eloquent statements of what the 1960s were all about. A versatile man, Oglesby even recorded an album of original folk music on Vanguard Records, taught at Antioch, Dartmouth and MIT, and in his last years wrote on the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Oglesby came to SDS later in his life than the usual SDS recruit, who was young and more often than not, a university student. When he was introduced to SDS in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Oglesby was already in his 30s, married with three children, and a technical writer and editor for a defense contractor. Involvement in the campaign of a liberal Democratic challenger to the Republican incumbent led him to research the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s, and, through his research, come to oppose it—an opinion not at all welcomed by the campaign where he was a volunteer. But the position paper he drafted for this campaign drew the attention of an SDS activist at the University of Michigan, and he and his wife were soon immersed in the younger, student-dominated New Left represented by SDS. He went on to be elected SDS's national President in 1965, and its leading spokesperson, especially on the Vietnam War.

I too was a member of SDS in the 1960s, and though I never actually met and talked with Oglesby (I did see him briefly at a meeting in East Lansing, Michigan), was influenced by him, as we all were, even when we developed politics that differed sharply from his—from the left, or looking back, perhaps more from the ultraleft. Aside from Oglesby's *Ravens in the Storm*, two other memoirs of leading SDSers that I also recommend—Cathy Wilkerson's *Flying Close to the Sun* and the iconic Mark Rudd's *Underground*—are thoughtful and honest in admitting the crucial mistakes made by the 1960s New Left. My own story in SDS is not without interest, if I may say so, and is recounted in

Kenneth Henineman's *Campus Wars,* a well-regarded history of the anti-Vietnam War movement at the non-elite universities such as the Michigan State University I attended then, which were also hotbeds of radicalism among their more plebian and less WASPish student bodies.

"Can it be it was all so simple then/Or has time rewritten every line?" Barbara Streisand sang poignantly in the mid-1970s, when the tumult of the 1960s had become quiescent; former radical-oriented students had become yuppies, or in Mark Rudd's invidious word, the "hipoisie"; Richard Nixon had been re-elected in an overwhelming victory over liberal antiwar candidate George McGovern; and SDS had shattered and exploded just a few years earlier, dividing into hostile factions, the most publicized and most destructive of which was Weatherman, later the Weather Underground, which not only damaged buildings through its bombs, but also managed to bomb the left that still existed in the 1970s out of effectiveness.

It was a different time then, one hard to imagine if one hadn't been there, but the books I mentioned above give a pretty good picture of a time that seems so alien to us now. It was a time when people talked positively of socialism and an impending revolution against U.S. capitalism, students were demanding their professors address the political issues of the day in their classrooms, anger at the ever-continuing Vietnam War drew hundreds of thousands in massive protest marches, the struggle for civil rights had moved from desegregating lunch counters to open articulation of Black Power, women were stirring in their indignation at the pervasive sexism all around then (including on the left, very much male-dominated), and it was far more fashionable to be reading Mao and Che Guevara than Ayn Rand. The 1960s were a heady, exciting, although bittersweet time, and it was a time where the left actually seemed relevant to U.S. political discourse. A good part of what caused all that to come to an end is well brought out in *Ravens in the Storm* in those passages describing his being confronted by Bernardine Dohrn, a firebrand action-oriented radical who had no patience for what she contemptuously dismissed as Oglesby's accommodations to mere liberalism, and who wanted to transform SDS into a Marxist-Leninist party—something she did with one faction of it, Weatherman, as one of its principal leaders. Oglesby's eloquent words bring out the whole Kafkaesque quality of this political approach (which may be dignifying it too much) exemplified by the very intelligent but equally addled Dohrn (who is someone I was acquainted with when I was in SDS). Oglesby describes her well on p. 254 of his memoir: "BD [Bernardine Dohrn] was smart, but as Dr. Johnson [Samuel Johnson, noted 18th Century British writer] first noticed, some ideas are so absurd that only the very brilliant can espouse them."

Elsewhere in the book he dismisses Weatherman as "comic book Marxism," but looking back on it, Weatherman wasn't alone among self-proclaimed Marxists as having "comic book Marxism." While many of radicals (I among them) then espoused Marx, Lenin and other Marxists, most of us had not read a whole lot of them, only smidgens that we embraced as insightful and attractive in that same way that Christians find in smidgens from the Bible.

During this time of the later 1960s there was a great deal of emphasis on militancy, as though bold, confrontational tactics would in themselves galvanize the populace, thus throwing down the gauntlet to the Establishment in a way that not only could it not ignore, it couldn't counter either. Tactics replaced both strategy and analysis, I now see clearly; and real militancy is often those "timid, accommodationist" approaches that move people to act in concerted ways that actually achieve results. But then we were so caught up in our anger at the way U.S. liberal society had failed to live up to its promises we couldn't see that; we only saw that our burning rage would be the spark that burned the whole system down, whether we had any idea of what would replace it or not. In this we were just like our nemesis, the Old Left of the 1930s, which dogmatically espoused a "socialism" which, if it had a model, was one drawn from the very mixed legacy of Bolshevik Russia, or worse, what it had become under the rule of Stalin; or as it would espouse later, a romanticizing of the Chinese and Cuban experiences; or was too wistful to be called a model at all.

The early 1960s New Left had broken precisely with that dogmatism stemming from the 1930s, and was far more searching and intuitive, questioning and skeptical. All this was expressed well in SDS's founding document, 1962's *Port Huron Statement*, which went on to suffer the fate of many a founding statement—paid generous lip service by later members, but not really read. By the late 1960s this side of SDS was nonexistent, and the firebrands who had more passion than understanding had come to dominate the organization. Once again, Oglesby sums up his positive differences with this, in a fairly lengthy passage on p. 176 of *Ravens in the Storm* that's worth quoting in full:

> "BD had brains, bravado, and beauty. She embodied that part of a many-sided SDS that was most charismatic, most willing to take risks.
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> "But timid liberal that I was, I also thought this was SDS's most dangerous side, a flaw with a real chance of going fatal. Like a number of SDSers, BD had a bit too much confidence in her own anger. She could seem easily as fierce a fundamentalist as the folks in my South Carolina family. She had the word. She knew the truth. There was one god, the dialectic. The savior was Marx. Salvation was the revolution. End of discussion. The saved might disagree about tactics, but the revolutionary goal was fixed. A lot of ink was spilled in those days, and I spilled a good deal of it myself, on the question of what the New Left was, what made it *left*, what made it *new*. But for Bernardine, the question of our essential identity was settled and fixed. The New Left was SDS, and SDS was what she and her cohorts chose to do. Her SDS discussed its philosophy in the streets. Action was all. The American system was evil because it was killing masses of people for the profit of a few, and our task as revolutionaries was to do whatever we could to hasten its overthrow. As for dialogue, you don't have dialogue with the Devil.
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> "But hell was my favorite hangout. The Devil was my favorite dinner companion."[Emphasis in original]

In the final chapter of *Containment and Change*, Oglesby suggested the New Left's natural ally was the libertarian Old Right of the 1930s, which had opposed the New Deal, that cornerstone of liberal policy and approach, in the name of a liberty-loving laissez faire that was essentially an anarchism of the right. I consider this fundamentally flawed, most tellingly because the free market excludes a lot of people from participation by the social factors of poverty, racial and gender discrimination, and enhances, rather than alleviates, the gap between the rich who have way too much, and the working classes who, even with good jobs, still have way too little; something to my mind certainly proven by the current recession. But Oglesby wanted to speak not only to the left on the War and the fundamental flaws within American society; he thought there was a receptive right out there that would be interested also. Although wrong in this regard, Oglesby was right in emphasizing that an effective left had to do much more than "preach to the choir," that it had to move on to dialogue with the skeptical as well as the already converted. Surely this is a healthy impulse, and one the left of yesterday and today usually slights, too often dismissing the simply "unconverted" as opponents. Not that there aren't real opponents of the left, not that there aren't some people beyond talking to. But they tend to be among the public leaders and personalities, not necessarily among our neighbors and classmates, who may be reachable. And skeptical, questioning objection to a fixed way of thinking is one of the most intellectually healthy things around, and often the opposite of being mere dogmatism from the other side.

A fitting end to this discussion is Cathy Wilkerson's thoughtful expansion on thoughts that came to her contemplating what Oglesby wrote in *Containment and Change*. She begins this discussion on

pp. 111-112 of *Flying Close to the Sun* by quoting Oglesby himself:

> "[T]he expansionary dynamic of Western commercial culture has been the root, the denominating constant, of modern history. The grandeur of Western liberalism, its material abundance, the flourishing of its arts and sciences, its painful construction of constitutional democracy—these interconnected achievements have been financed by the sustained theft called imperialism."

Wilkerson reflects thoughtfully and with appropriate thoroughness as follows:

> "I failed, however, to notice the fuller meanings in Carl's observation that the 'achievements' in the area of limited democracy had been financed by 'theft.' I focused only on the theft part—and had begun to think less and less about the achievement part. I had been fascinated with the origins of our secular, constitutional democracy in college, but the more I learned about the damage we had done, the easier it was to forget what an accomplishment it had been. The US system had cobbled together many of the most progressive ideas of the times in a powerful combination, ideas from Native American federalist government, from the utopians, from the philosophers of emergent capitalism, and from advocates of religious tolerance. From the rapidly escalating power of invention and science, thinkers of the day understood that within both nature and mechanics forces worked in tension with each other. Could a system bought with such devastating consequences have a future in a just and peaceful world? By then, I could only see greed as the primary motivating force for the cruelties of the system. It was a ready explanation for how the wealthy could be so immune to the human costs of their work and their wealth. In my focus on the human frailties of these wealthy power brokers, their use of the language of democracy seemed bitterly hypocritical.
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> "The fact was, *we* didn't know how to address the problems of the economy, beyond our intuition that participatory democracy might hold the key. We had encountered a host of problems already, trying to bring that vision to life in relatively small projects like ERAP [an early SDS community organizing project], and within SDS itself. As imperfect as the system in the United States was, most people who were excluded did not want to destroy the system, only to join in. The problem was that the system in its current state depended on the economic exclusion of a great many people to survive. I certainly didn't know how to change that. Who decided who got to benefit and who didn't? Was that even a question a democracy should ask?
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> "Carl [Oglesby] did not advocate any economic model. Instead, he sidestepped this conversation about alternatives to capitalism by asserting that 'the revolutionary's motivating vision of change is at root a vision…not of something that *will* be there, but of something that will be there *no longer*…The fundamental revolutionary motive is not to construct a Paradise but to destroy an Inferno.'" [Emphasis in original. Oglesby quote embedded in the text is from *Containment and Change*.]

Thus do we have in this longish summation a significant understanding of the strengths and the weakness within Carl Oglesby's vision, which are embodied themselves in the strengths and weaknesses of SDS, of the New Left itself. Yet for all its flaws, it embraces something far beyond that mere, grubby lack of vision that permeates our society today. For us, for society, surely better to look for answers in the legacy of the New Left than from the "realistic" compromises of the

Democrats. This is the gist of Carl Oglesby's meaning for the left today, the inherent power that Carl Oglesby's insightful intellect bequeaths.

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