

Weather Underground Rises from the Ashes: They're Baack!

January 23, 2010

I attended part of a January 20, 2006, "day workshop of interventions" — aka "a day of dialogic interventions" — at Columbia University on "Radical Politics and the Ethics of Life." [1] The event aimed "to stage a series of encounters . . . to bring to light . . . the political aporias [sic] erected by the praxis of urban guerrilla groups" in Europe and the United States from the 1960s to the 80s. [2] Hosted by Columbia's Anthropology Department, workshop speakers included veterans and leaders of the Weather Underground Bernardine Dohrn and Bill Ayers, historian Jeremy Varon, poststructuralist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and a dozen others. The panel I sat through was just awful. [3]

Veterans of Weather (as well as some fans) seem to be on a drive to rehabilitate, cleanse, and perhaps revive it — not necessarily as a new organization, but rather as an ideological component of present and future movements. There have been signs of such a sanitization and romanticization for some time. A landmark in this rehabilitation is Bill Ayers, *Fugitive Days: A Memoir* (Beacon Press 2001; Penguin Books 2003). This is a dubious account, full of anachronisms, inaccuracies, unacknowledged borrowings from unnamed sources (such as the documentary, *Atomic Cafe*, 17-19), adding up to an attempt to cover over the fact that Ayers was there only for a part of the things he describes in a volume that nonetheless presents itself as a memoir. It's also faux literary and soft core ("warm and wet and welcoming"(68)), "ruby mouth"(38), "she felt warm and moist"(81)), full of archaic sexism, littered with boasts of Ayers's sexual achievements, utterly untouched by feminism. (Among Ayers's many errors are some that betray ignorance of the Women's Liberation Movement: he repeats the media-generated myth that 1968 Miss America protesters burned their bras (117).)

Ayers is the perfect Weatherman: "Hostility to feminism," writes Dan Berger in a new history of Weather, "characterized the organization from the beginning" [4] — and this at a time when radical feminism was growing. Weather kept its distance from one of the most vibrant movements of its time, taking such archaic positions as "The Women's Question is a Class Question," just a part of capitalism rather than patriarchy. [5]

There are too many inaccuracies in *Fugitive Days* to list here. Some are petty: Howdy Doody fans will wonder whether Ayers's "Uncle Bob" (24) is the same as "Buffalo Bob." But some of the errors reflect political blind spots. One such error concerns Marion Delgado, who was a kind of a Weather saint, but Ayers can't even keep his hagiography straight. A photo of Marion, a five-year-old Chicano boy, smiling and holding up a piece of concrete, appeared in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) weekly paper, *New Left Notes*, with a caption indicating that he had caused a train wreck with his concrete. Weatherpeople began, in *hommage* to this act, to sign and present themselves as "Marion Delgado." But Ayers (144) places this event in Italy — with all of Weather's third worldism, he can't tell the difference between Italians and Mexicans (or Californians) — and says that the train that Delgado derailed was a freight train, and that nobody was hurt. Inaccuracies aside, it's bizarre for a political group to admire this child's act. In a learned disquisition on Marion, Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York 1973), 605n explains that Marion had derailed a passenger train in California in 1947. Ayers's changing a passenger train to a freight train, and his stress on the claim that there were thus no injuries, is one of many sanitizations in his book.

All in all, Ayers romanticizes and reaffirms Weather: "I regret nothing." In ways totally compatible with postmodernism, he boasts of faulty memory and subjectivity as the only truth.

"Memory is a motherfucker," he begins; "I myself remember almost nothing" (7):

There is . . . a necessary incompleteness here, a covering over of facts and a blurring of details, which is in part an artifact of those fugitive days and those exquisite and terrible times . . . Is this, then, the truth? Not exactly. Although it feels entirely honest to me (preface).

Fugitive Days was published in September 2001. In a striking coincidence, an interview with Ayers (and Dohrn) appeared in the *New York Times* on September 11, 2001, under the stunning headline, "No Regrets for a Love of Explosives; In a Memoir of Sorts, a War Protester Talks of Life with the Weathermen." After 9/11, nobody wants to talk about this classic and deeply embarrassing article. "I don't regret setting bombs," Ayers begins; "I feel we didn't do enough." Here, too, he boasts of his tenuous connection to truth. In his response to the *Times*' quoting some of his above remarks about "truth," he says, "Obviously, the point is it's a reflection on memory . . . It's true as I remember it." Thus, the postmodernism in the contemporary air provides him with cover for the rehabilitation of Weather.

The 2002 film *The Weather Underground* was made by younger people and seems well intended.[6] But it offers the viewer a Hobson's Choice between Weather and Todd Gitlin: I didn't know whether to shit, or go blind! There is in actuality much space for an effective left between these two bizarre poles. Despite the substandard product that Weather veterans are peddling, a sympathetic response to a bowdlerized Weather may not be so hard to achieve in the present frustrated and disoriented mood of the left. Bernardine Dohrn says elsewhere: "I have not met with such intense curiosity from the young about our experience since I came overground at the end of the seventies. If we were to take an anti-imperialist show on the road, we would sell out." [7]

Many students and faculty have been infected by postmodernism in this, its terminal phase, and therefore have little concern for concrete reality. So Weather can be discussed in appealing-sounding abstractions, without reference to the destructive inanities of their role at the June 1969 Chicago convention of SDS, the October 1969 Days of Rage,[8] the bombings, the bombing fuck-ups, etc.

Weather's craziness was seen at the time: Maurice Isserman notes contemporary parodies of "You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows": "You don't need a fisherman to know when something's fishy," and "You don't need a rectal thermometer to know who the assholes are" (H-Amstdy 1/30/06). And today, some former WUers have offered intelligent critiques. Mark Rudd sees WU as "a total disaster," and regrets having

chosen the stupid, losing strategy of 'revolutionary' violence . . . [T]he Weather Underground was a huge fuck-up! We did the work of the FBI by destroying SDS. We accidentally killed three of our own people. We split and undermined the larger anti-war movement.. the importance of the Weather Underground was that it was a total disaster.

"Don't try this at home." [9]

Rudd's fellow Weatherperson Cathy Wilkerson's critical *ZNet* review calls Ayers "inaccurate," and sees the book as "a cynical, superficial romp . . . making these struggles seem like a glorious carnival." [10] Speaking of Ayers's descriptions of his relations with women, she notes his

absolute lack of reflection since then . . . Ayers relates his relentless sexual encounters without the slightest trace of awareness that some of these encounters might not have been so positive for the woman . . . He indicates no awareness that he might have used his privileges to provoke women to give him access to a vulnerability that he was unable to honor.

It is worth recalling that abuse of explosives was only one of many Weather errors. The chamber of horrors would have to include Dohrn's remark at the 1969 Flint Michigan SDS "War Council" concerning the murders committed by the Charles Manson gang in Los Angeles: "Dig it: first they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them, then they even shoved a fork into the victim's stomach. Wild!?" [11] This brings us to Weather's "white skin privilege" line.

WHILE RECOGNIZING THE ROLE OF RACISM in America, the white skin privilege analysis placed Weather in opposition to whites in general and to the white working class in particular, towards whom Weather was dismissive and contemptuous. It saw whites as complicit and corrupted beneficiaries of racism and imperialism who had sold out and were therefore to be opposed, perhaps killed, rather than addressed, educated, and recruited, with a program relevant to their situation. "Fight the People," said Ayers and early Weather. [12] Ayers recalls his thoughts concerning white skin privilege at the time of the climactic 1969 SDS convention (139). The Revolutionary Youth Movement (i.e., Weather), he says, saw racism as

providing privileges and material benefits . . . to white people, mystifying many and winning their allegiance . . . white skin privilege was . . . a real and effective bribe against consciousness and struggle . . . white people are mostly brainwashed. We lucky few will wake them up . . .

Other than the slight wryness of tone, there is no evidence that Ayers either had, or has, any criticism of the substance of this notion of administering a wake-up call to whites, rather than trying to convince them politically. (Recall that he says that he regrets nothing. One measure of the pervasiveness of this Piafian theme appears in the blurbs at the front of Ayers's book, praising him: "Writes . . . without . . . apology"; "no . . . remorse" [Thomas Frank]; ". . . without a trace of . . .

'second thinking' "[Edward Said].) This is a position that would lead to justification for killing whites — including their babies: "All white babies are pigs." [13] *The oft-repeated claim that Weather killed nobody but themselves ignores the fact that the bombs being prepared when the townhouse blew up in 1970 were laden with roofing nails as shrapnel, and intended for detonation at a dance at Fort Dix. Only Weather incompetence saved these prospective victims from the grotesque deaths visited on three Weatherpeople.* [14] (Today, those who didn't live through all this may nonetheless get the feel of Weather's positions by considering Ward Churchill's condemnation of the "technocratic corps" who died as victims in the 9/11 World Trade Center attack as "little Eichmanns." [15])

At the workshop at Columbia, Bernardine Dohrn served up all the hoary platitudes about the everyday violence of the standing order — all true — leading inevitably to a justification of violent response by a tiny minority substituting itself for a mass movement; at the same time, she offered a rhetorical parenthesis rejecting armed struggle. Neither the efficacy nor morality of Weather tactics and theories were scrutinized, nor any inquiry made into how you construct a majority radical democratic movement by denouncing and writing off the majority. Dohrn's defense of Weather included the remark that in the face of terrible oppressions and injustices, it is necessary "to do something about it, it almost doesn't matter what." But it does matter, if we are interested in building rather than tearing apart a new left. Clearly, almost forty years after the Weather disaster, she hasn't gotten it. Indeed, she says that the actions of WU "made people smile." (For one fan's confirmation of this contention, see Roz Payne (posting on H-Amstdy [1/30/06]): "We smiled when we read of their actions, which NEVER harmed people except themselves.")

Weather killed and buried SDS — a catastrophe for the left. (This is a complex matter, which I originally addressed here in too breezy and unqualified a manner. Clearly, it was not Weather alone that killed SDS. On the other hand, note Mark Rudd's view above that the Weather Underground destroyed SDS.) Dohrn passes lightly over this, saying that SDS wasn't worth saving by the time Weather came on the scene. An anarchist in the audience made the important point that how you make the revolution will affect the kind of revolution that you get. Partly agreeing, Dohrn insisted that, while underground, Weatherpeople not only practiced participatory democracy, but also got closer to the working class and to various minorities. Just picture it: Weather, while underground, super-closeted and of necessity concealing their politics, makes friends with the working class (whom they have already disdainfully written off) — "nobody here but us regular American folks." Former WUer David Gilbert's reminiscence comes closer to the reality: "When you're underground, you can't go around saying, 'I'm your local representative from the Weather Underground. Let's discuss politics.'" [16]

As I mentioned above, the discussion of the Weather Underground at the Columbia workshop lacked concrete specifics. If we look beyond the abstraction to those specifics, Weather is a tragic laughingstock. It's the postmodern mood that allows such weird and empty discussion. How wonderful: we have lived to see Weather's posthumous rehabilitation in pomo hands. But we need a new left today, and the evasion of realities of past, present and future won't help to build this left.

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There was much to laugh about, and much to weep about in the event at Columbia. But the funniest moment came when Columbia anthropologist Beth Povinelli recalled that when she was invited to speak on urban guerrilla groups, her first thought was that her brother is a primatologist.

Afterword

IS ALL THIS JUST BEATING A DEAD HORSE? Although I would hope so, in the present mood on the left there is some receptivity to a rehabilitation of Weather and Weather-like strategies, especially among the young who didn't live through the original reality. (One straw in the wind has been the confused and uncritical response to Ward Churchill in many parts of the left.) We have seen testimony from Dohrn and others about receptive audiences. As this is written, there is a promising attempt to found a new organization called SDS, and I wish it well. But for a sample of the uncritical, indeed adoring attitude towards Dohrn and her legacy by one of its main organizers, see Thomas Good, "From SDS to N[ational] C[onference on] O[rganized] R[esistance]: Socialism, Anarchism and Bernardine Dohrn." This is an enthusiastically positive report of a talk by Dohrn, which notes that "Her revolutionary passion [is] still intact after all these years of struggle" and describes her as pointing out "that one glaring failure of the Sixties was the ostracizing of [Vietnam] veterans" — not a word is said about the glaring failure of Weather. Good calls himself "an old admirer" and describes meeting Dohrn as "a very special moment for this New Leftist."

Another sign of the rising interest in Weather and the Weather legacy on the left is a flowering of literature, with varying degrees of admiration and criticism. In addition to Ayers, *Fugitive Days*, see, for instance, Ron Jacobs, *The Way the Wind Blew: A History of the Weather Underground* (Verso 1997; reissued 2005); Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (AK Press 2006)[17]; David Gilbert, *SDS/WUO: Students for a Democratic Society and the Weather Underground Organization* (Abraham Guillen Press 2002); Dan Berger, Chesa Boudin, Kenyon Farrow, eds. (preface by Bernardine Dohrn), *Letters from Young Activists: Today's Rebels Speak Out* (Nation Books 2005). For a valuable scholarly contribution, see Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (University of California Press 2004). For FBI materials on Weather Underground, see here. Some former WUers have memoirs in progress which will give a very different picture from that offered by Ayers.

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JUST AS THIS GOES TO PRESS in May, there are two interesting developments relevant to the rehabilitation of the Weather Underground.

1) *Weather Rehabilitation and the New SDS*. Together with others, Thomas Good — mentioned above in connection with his admiring views of Bernardine Dohrn — organized the first Northeast Regional Conference of the refounded Students for a Democratic Society at Brown University, April 23, 2006. (The following account is based on material on the SDS website and postings on the SDS discussion list, "New Left Cafe.")

By a top-down process that led to some disagreement within SDS, Dohrn was invited as one of a small number of keynote speakers. (Ironically, Good is a self-described Wobbly and anarchosyndicalist.) Dohrn was billed as a "founding member of the Weather Underground." This is not a neutral self-identification. Allowing herself to be described this way, or perhaps asking that she be so presented, singles out a specific part of her background and suggests pride rather than understanding of her destructive role in those years. (As we will see, her speech offered not a word in response to criticisms of Weather.) Suppose I asked to have myself introduced at a speaking gig as "Jesse Lemisch, who joined the Communist Party in 1939 and rejoined in 1956." This would be kind of in-your-face, and would seem to oblige me to offer some explanation.

Pictures and a video of Dohrn appear on the SDS website, and she was treated with reverence at the conference. But there was an exception to this — a dispute that illuminates the new SDS and Weather, and raises questions about whether SDS is open to debate about its politics and willing to think critically about the legacy of Weather.

One of the keynote speakers was Bob Ross, an old SDSer and a founding member, now Professor of Sociology at Clark University and an activist in the anti-sweatshop movement. He made points critical of Weather, violence, and bombing. Dohrn, speaking next, addressed none of this. What is of particular interest to us is how others viewed Ross's raising the point, and Dohrn's silence. Paul Buhle, perhaps neutrally, reports that Dohrn "avoided the old controversies about Weather." But Thomas Good reports himself as "dismayed by the shots [Ross] took at Weather," and he brands those remarks as "sectarian" and possibly leading to "factional backbiting." He goes on to describe Dohrn as "eloquent as ever," a "class act [who] did not respond to Bob Ross's comments and focused on the future of the new SDS." Another speaker, named "m(A)tt," a "social anarchist" from the CLASH Collective of Hartford, tore into Ross, dismissing in the harshest terms Ross's criticism of Weather: Ross had made a "poor choice of a venue to grind his axe . . . Bernardine Dohrn, show[ed] her inherent female supremacy [wow, unpack that phrase!] by taking the high road and declining to use a captive audience to settle scores from thirty-seven years ago . . ."

THOMAS GOOD SAYS that the new SDS is approaching 100 chapters. The rebirth of such an organization is in many ways good news. But from the above it would seem clear that SDS isn't open to debate about the politics that Weather represented. I'll resist the urge to speak of those who condemn themselves to relive the past. But it is vital that SDS face up to this part of its past if it is to help in building the kind of daring, democratic radicalism that we need. A left organization that dismisses internal political debate as mere sectarian backbiting doesn't have a very bright future. Too bad.

(Meantime, at the conference as elsewhere, attention to Bernardine Dohrn once again generally violated the old rule, "Say anything you want about me; just spell my name right." Try it yourself.)

2) Imminent publication of Bill Ayers, Bernardine Dohrn, Jeff Jones, eds., *Sing a Battle Song: The Revolutionary Poetry, Statements and Communiques of the Weather Underground 1970- 1974* (Seven Stories Press, scheduled for June 1, 2006). Thanks to David Barber for calling this to my attention. I have only an "early version" of the manuscript, which may not be complete. There is neither time nor space here to give it its due, and I have only been able to give it quick scrutiny. The material in this volume, consisting of documents from the time, is of historical value and will help readers part way to a better understanding of Weather.

This book consists of three components, all originally published in 1974 and 1975, put together in one volume now in order to catch and extend the wave of Weather rehabilitation. Jonah Raskin's 1974 introduction to Weather's Communiques (many of which were signed by Dohrn) offers a useful short history of the organization from a partisan although not uncritical perspective, and presents a chronology. Raskin justifies Weather's bombings. The communiques themselves are meaty and certainly remind us of the times. People should read them to know just what it is that they are romanticizing. But Weather must be understood both for what it said and for what it did, and this volume is not adequate for those seeking fully to understand the horrors that they carried out and the damage they did to the left.

The volume's poems by Weather Underground women are an attempt to shore up Weather's reputation in an area where Weather itself has acknowledged great weakness — the organization's alienation from the Women's Liberation Movement. But it's hard to see how these poems will help Weather's reputation for feminism. This section includes poems celebrating a bombing at MIT, the Symbionese Liberation Army (this poem appears twice in the book), and the hijacking of a Pan Am jet; another condemns American POW's in Vietnam, and an especially peculiar one celebrates "Our Men" as "sinewy warriors" with "long hair curling and straggling down your backs . . ." This is

feminism?

Footnotes

This is a revised and expanded version of an article originally posted on History News Network, 1/23/06; H-1960s 1/23/06; Portside 1/27/06; ZNet 1/28/06; H-Amstdy 1/31/06. I have benefited from the discussions that followed these postings.

1. See the announcement and program.
2. The "Postmodern Therapies" listserv's "Postmodern Terms from A to D" offers a definition of "aporia": "Wonder and amazement before the confusing puzzles and paradoxes of our lives and of the universe. Socrates and the other ancient philosophers tried to evoke the philosophic spirit in young men by awakening their aporia, not by simply providing answers to these puzzles." Does that clear it up?
3. I assume that inclusion as a speaker in the conference did not necessarily imply approval of the Weather Underground (WU), nor of Weather — although I know of at least two former WUers who have taken critical positions on Weather, and who decided that it was fruitless to attempt to attend as critical voices and so did not participate. I have commented only on the session I attended, where the speakers were Bernardine Dohrn and Columbia Anthropology Professor Elizabeth Povinelli.
4. Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (AK Press 2006), 292.
5. Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 219.
6. For my critique of an earlier film that touches on Weather but fails to explain the collapse of SDS, "Rebels with a Cause" (2000), see Lemisch, "Students for a Democratic Society, Heroically Portrayed, Before the Inexplicable Fall: Consensus History in a Left Film," *Film & History*, 31.1 (Spring 2001).
7. Bernardine Dohrn, "Letter to Young Activists: Beware Sixties Nostalgia," MRZine, July 7, 2005. This is adapted from Dohrn's preface to Dan Berger, Chesa Boudin, Kenyon Farrow, eds., *Letters from Young Activists: Today's Rebels Speak Out* (2005). See also Newsreel co-founder Roz Payne (H-1960s 1/25/06): "My students were taken by the . . . Weather Underground film. Most of them thought the people were brave and understood why they did what they did because they did not kill anyone (except for themselves in the town house)."
8. At the time, Weather's adversary, Progressive Labor, characterized the Days of Rage as the work of "hate-the-people lunatics." Nigel Young, *An Infantile Disorder? The Crisis and Decline of the New Left* (London 1977), p. 276.
9. Mark Rudd, "How a Movie Changed My Life," "Heartland Journal," Summer 2005.
10. See here.
11. Sale, *SDS*, p. 628. Dan Berger's generosity to Dohrn, who is one of his major sources, appears here in his failure to offer more than a brief paraphrase of Dohrn's awful words, while giving equal space for her defense: *Outlaws of America*, 123. Dohrn's words are just the tip of the iceberg: the fork motif was widespread in Weather, in greetings, farewells, names of groups, etc.

12. Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 96. Always apologetic, Berger says: "[*Fight the People*] was, to be sure, part of the group's early hyperbole, but a closer reading reveals it to be a more complex view of confronting white supremacy."

13. Sale, *SDS*, 628: "The Weatheranalysis held that whites were virtually useless in the world-wide confrontation going on, and except for a few brave streetfighters like the Weathermen, they were all corrupted, bought-off tyrants. Logically, then, the death of a white baby is a positive revolutionary action, and indeed the Weathermen actually held abstract debates at the [1969 Flint] "war council" about whether killing white babies is 'correct', a Weatherman at one point shouting out to the audience, 'All white babies are pigs.' From there it was only a step to Dohrn's ecstatic speech about the Charles Manson gang . . . "

14. I have seen no mention of the significance of the fact that the bombs would also have killed female dancing partners. WU could not have failed to foresee this, so there would have had to have been some extremely obnoxious theoretical rationale, e.g. "class enemies," "soldiers' girlfriends," or "collateral damage."

15. "If there was a better, more effective, or in fact any other way of visiting some penalty befitting their participation upon the little Eichmanns inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers, I'd really be interested in hearing about it." See Anthony Lappé, "Ward Churchill's Banality of Evil" and "Ward Churchill Statement." For Churchill's fuller justification of the WTC attack and his support of "the gallant sacrifices of the combat teams," see his "Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens." There may be more direct connections between Churchill and Weather. A Google search finds claims that he was an active participant in the 1969 Days of Rage, plus a boast, later rescinded, that he taught bomb-making to WU.

16. Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 153.

17. This is a serious and voluminous work, based on research in written sources and interviews ("the backbone of the book"(x)) with more than twenty former WUers. *Outlaws of America* is a useful compendium by a hard-working young scholar. But it is a deeply apologetic work. It is unintentionally an almost laughable record of endless "error," "failure" and "unraveling." Each such failure is explained away: see for instance, the above defense of the white skin privilege line; or, "The townhouse blast was a grievous error, but Weather's broader analysis of the political context still held true" (131). Berger holds back uncomfortable data, such as Dohrn's Charles Manson speech. Again and again, Berger's interviewees express second thoughts, but he presents such thoughts only ad hoc, rarely finding fundamental flaws in WU. Berger's effort at rehabilitation prevents him from acknowledging that, even within the limits of his partisan argument, Weather's legacy might be presented as at best a dual one. I hope for better work from this energetic young scholar.