**counterpunch**

**edited by Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey st. clair**

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***When Spontaneity Fails ...***

**What It Takes to Build a Movement**

By MARK RUDD

**Since the summer of 2003, I've crisscrossed the country speaking at colleges and theaters and bookstores, first with *The Weather Underground* documentary and, starting in March of this year, with my book, *Underground: 'My Life with SDS and the Weathermen* (William Morrow, 2334). In discussions with young people, they often tell me, “Nothing anyone does can ever make a difference.”**

**The words still sound strange: it's a phrase I never once heard forty years ago, a sentiment obviously false on its surface. Growing up in the Fifties and Sixties, I – and the rest of the country – knew about the civil rights movement in the South, and what was most evident was that individuals, joining with others, actually were making a difference. The labor movement of the Thirties to the Sixties had improved the lives of millions; the anti-war movement had brought down a sitting president – LBJ, March 1968– and was actively engaged in stopping the Vietnam War. In the forty years since, the women's movement, gay rights, disability rights, animal rights, and environmental movements have all registered enormous social and political gains. To old new lefties, such as myself, this is all self-evident.**

**So, why the defeatism? In the absence of knowledge of how these historical movements were built, young people assume that they arose spontaneously, or, perhaps, charismatic leaders suddenly called them into existence. On the third Monday of every January we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. having had a dream; knowledge of the movement itself is lost.**

**The current anti-war movement's weakness, however, is very much alive in young people's experience. They cite the fact that millions turned out in the streets in the early spring of 2003 to oppose the pending U.S. attack on Iraq, but that these demonstrations had no effect.**

**“We demonstrated, and they didn't listen to us.” Even the activists among them became demoralized as numbers at demonstrations dropped off very quickly, street demonstrations becoming cliches, and, despite a big shift in public opinion in 2006, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan droned on to today. The very success of the *spontaneous* early mobilization seems to have contributed to the anti-war movement's long-term weakness.**

**Something's missing. I first got an insight into articulating what it is when I picked up *Letters from Young Activists: Today's Rebels Speak Out,* edited by Dan Berger, Chesa Boudin and Kenyon Farrow (Nation Books, 2005). Andy Cornell, in a letter to the movement that first radicalized him, “Dear Punk Rock Activism,” criticizes the conflation of the terms “activism” and “organizing.” He writes, “activists are individuals who dedicate their time and energy to various efforts they hope will contribute to social, political, or economic change. Organizers are activists who, in addition to their own participation, work to move other people to take action and help them develop skills, political analysis and confidence within the context of organizations. Organizing is a process – creating long-term campaigns that mobilize a certain constituency to press for specific demands from a particular target, using a defined strategy and escalating tactics.” In other words, it's not enough for punks to continually express their contempt for mainstream values through their alternate identity; they've got to move toward “organizing masses of people.”**

**Aha! Activism = self-expression; organizing = movement-building.**

**Until recently, I'd rarely heard young people call themselves “organizers.” The common term for years has been “activists.” Organizing was reduced to the behind the scenes nuts-and-bolts work needed to pull off a specific event, such as a concert or demonstration. But forty years ago, we only used the word “activist” to mock our enemies' view of us, as when a university administrator or newspaper editorial writer would call us “mindless activists.” We were organizers, our work was building a mass movement, and that took constant discussion of goals, strategy and tactics (and, later, contributing to our downfall, ideology).**

**Thinking back over my own experience, I realized that I had inherited this organizer's identity from the red diaper babies I fell in with at the Columbia chapter of Students for a Democratic Society, SDS. Raised by parents in the labor and civil rights and communist or socialist movements, they had naturally learned the organizing method as other kids learned how to throw footballs or bake pineapple upside-down cakes. “Build the base!” was the constant strategy of Columbia SDS for years.**

**Yet, young activists I met were surprised to learn that major events, such as the Columbia rebellion of April 1968, did not happen spontaneously, that they took years of prior education, relationship building, reconsideration on the part of individuals of their role in the institution - i.e., organizing. It seemed to me that they believed that movements happen as a sort of dramatic or spectator sport: after a small group of people express themselves, large numbers of bystanders see the truth in what they're saying and join in. the mass anti-war mobilization of the Spring 2003, which failed to stop the war, was the only model they knew.**

**I began looking for a literature that would show *how* successful historical movements were built. Not the outcomes or triumphs, such as the great civil rights March on Washington in 1963, but the many streams that eventually created the floods. I wanted to know who said what to whom and how did they respond. One book was recommended to me repeatedly by friends, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, by Charles M. Payne (University of California Press, 1995). Payne, an African-American sociologist, now at the University of Chicago, asked the question how young student organizers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, had successfully organized voter registration and related campaigns in one town, Greenwood, Mississippi, in the years 1961-64. The Mississippi Delta region was one of the most benighted areas of the South, with conditions for black cotton sharecroppers and plantation workers not much above the level of slavery. Despite the fact that illiteracy and economic dependency were the norm among black people in the Delta, and that they were the target of years of violent terror tactics, including murder, SNCC miraculously organized these same people to take the steps toward their own freedom, through attaining voting rights and education. How did they do it?**

**What Payne uncovers through his investigation into SNCC in Greenwood is an organizing method that has no name but is solidly rooted in the traditions of church women of the rural South. Black churches usually had charismatic male ministers, who, as a consequence of their positions, led in an authoritarian manner. The work of the congregations themselves, however, the social events and education and mutual aid were organized at the base level by women, who were democratic and relational in style. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Council, SCLC, used the ministerial model in their mobilizing for events, while the young people of SNCC – informed by the teaching and examples of freedom movement veterans Ella Baker and Septima Clark – concentrated on building relationships with local people and helping them develop into leaders within democratic structures. SNCC's central organizing principle,” participatory democracy,” was a direct inheritance from Ella Baker.**

**Payne writes, “SNCC preached a gospel of individual efficacy. What you do matters. In order to move politically, people had to believe that. In Greenwood, the movement was able to exploit communal and familial traditions that encouraged people to believe in their own light.”**

**The features of the method, sometimes called “developmental” or “transformational organizing,” involve long-term strategy, patient base-building, personal engagement between people, full democratic participation, education and the development of people’s leadership capabilities, and coalition-building. The developmental method is often juxtaposed to Alinsky-style organizing, which is usually characterized as top-down and manipulative.**

**For a first-hand view of Alinsky organizing – though it’s never named as such – by a trained and seasoned practitioner, see Barack Obama’s book, *Dreams from My Father* (three Rivers Press, 1995 and 2004). In the middle section of the book, “Chicago,” Obama describes his three years organizing on the streets and housing projects of South Chicago. He beautifully invokes his motives – improving young people's lives – but at the same time draws a murky picture of organizing. Questions abound: Who trained him? What was his training? Who paid him? What is the guiding ideology? What is his relationship to the people he calls “my leaders?” Are they above him or are they manipulated by him? Who are calling whose shots? What are the long-term consequences? It's a great piece to start a discussion with young organizers.**

**While reading *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, I realized that much of what we had practiced in SDS was derived from SNCC and this developmental organizing tradition, up to and including the vision of “participatory democracy,” which was incorporated in the 1962 SDS founding document, “The Port Huron Statement. Columbia SDS's work was patient, strategic, base-building, using both confrontation and education. I, myself, had been nurtured and developed into a leadership position through years of close friendship with older organizers. However, my clique's downfall came post-1968, when, under the spell of the illusion of revolution, we abandoned organizing, first for militant confrontation (*Weatherman and the Days of Rage*, Oct. 1969) and then armed urban guerilla warfare (*the Weather Underground*, 1970-1976). We had, in effect, moved backward from organizing to self-expression, believing, ridiculously, that that would build the movement. At the moment when more organizing was needed to build a permanent anti-imperialist mass movement, we abandoned organizing. This is the story I tell in my book, *Underground*. It's about good organizing (Columbia), leading to worse (Weatherman), leading to horrible (the Weather Underground). I hope it's useful to contemporary organizers, as they contemplate how to build the coming mass movement(s).**

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***Top Down vs. Bottom Up***

**What Do Grassroots Organizers Actually Do When They Organize?** By MIKE MILLER

**Mark Rudd’s recent “What It Takes to Build a Movement,” CounterPunch, 10/16-31/09, is illustrative of why it’s difficult to have a conversation with most people on “the left” about community organizing. He begins with a promising start: a concern that I share about the “Nothing anyone does can ever make a difference” response he is getting “in discussions with young people.” Ignoring for the moment his exaggerated claim that the anti-war movement “was actively engaged in stopping the Vietnam War”—though I do find most of the new left claims about the American anti-Vietnam war movement, at least, grandiose. It was the NLF that ended the war.**

**Then what I’ll call “partial history” begins: “In the forty years since, the women’s movement, gay rights, disability rights, animal rights, and environmental movements have all registered enormous social and political gains.” To talk about these things without also discussing the setbacks in the 1966 Congressional elections, the 1968 election of Tricky Dick Nixon, the massive defeat of George McGovern in 1972, the steadily increasing concentration of wealth and power in massive multi-national corporations, the steady decline in the real income of most Americans, particularly low-income minorities, the red-lining of the Rust Belt and the hyper-investment (leading the gentrification and other similar displacement of low-to-moderate income people), the eclipse of the labor movement, the incarceration of huge numbers of young African-Americans (and others)…you get the idea...is, at best partial. Reading Rudd here, one would almost think that 1960 – 2008 is just a steady stream of progress! But that’s really not what I want to focus on.**

**Rudd again gets interesting to me when he distinguishes organizers from activists. He evidences some understanding of organizing in, “Organizers are activists who, in addition to their own participation, work to move other people to take action and help them develop skills, political analysis and confidence within the context of organizations.” Not too bad, though there are several major problems including:**

**(1) I’m cautious about what he means by “political analysis;”**

**(2) he ignores one of the most important things that organizers do, namely develop relationships of mutual confidence among people so they can act together;**

**(3) by saying “within the context of organizations” he leaves fuzzy whether he is talking about energizing members of existing organizations or building new ones, and;**

**(4) he omits the idea that organizers, successful ones at least, build powerful organizations.**

**Continuing, he reveals the central weakness of his thinking about what organizers do: “Organizing is a process—creating long-term campaigns that mobilize a certain constituency to press for specific demands from a particular target, using a defined strategy and escalating tactics.” Not exactly: organizers build organizations that engage in campaigns. The process is organization building; one of the tools for doing that is action on issues. Other tools are mutual aid, member education, values reflection, internal organization renewal (when you’re working with existing congregations and union locals) or building new organizational units (when you’re creating a new, direct membership, organization), etc. Campaigns win things and are one of the things that build organizations. Organizers want to change the relations of power, not simply win this or that issue.**

**Rudd is again interesting to me when he says, “We were organizers, our work was building a mass movement, and that took constant discussion of goals, strategy and tactics (and, later, contributing to our downfall, ideology.)” Here Rudd and I appear to be on the same page; I’m particularly fascinated by the very last part of the point on ideology—after all the years of being told by various people on the left “you don’t have an ideology” (of course everyone does, and you need to define the term), it was a bit surprising to read this.**

**The discussion of what he and his comrades did at Columbia is interesting too, and here he identifies building relationships of mutual confidence as crucial to what they did. His counterparts at San Francisco State similarly organized their campus. Their problem (and I suspect his back then as well) was that they didn’t understand how to relate to the broader community—a subject to which I devote considerable attention in my book, *A Community Organizer’s Tale* (see CounterPunch review 9/4-5/09). If you didn’t back the student movement 100% you were a sell-out. Not exactly how to develop the majority constituencies that are essential to bring about significant change in this country. The students’ view of the world was far from how everyday laborers, homemakers, teachers, clerks, welfare recipients and others with whom I worked thought about what was going on at State (and in the student movement generally).**

**Rudd then pays appropriate tribute to one of my favorite books about SNCC, Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got The Light of Freedom*, and talks about Greenwood, MS 1961-1964. I was on the SNCC staff 1962 through 1966, and spent the summer before the well-known Mississippi Summer Project in Greenwood—the subject of Payne’s book—working with people like Sam Block, Wazir Peacock, Bob Moses, Martha Prescod, Stokely Carmichael, and others; I got to know Fanny Lou Hamer and a number of the local leaders there as well.**

**In his interpretation of Payne, Rudd lets the blinders, rather than insights, of ideology take over. “Black churches usually had charismatic male ministers, who, as a consequence of their positions, led in an authoritarian manner.” Rudd needs to look more closely. Any black minister who tried to lead in that fashion would soon find himself with a shrinking congregation or thrown out by the lay board. While Rudd more-or-less gets the part about the women at the base of these churches, and SNCC’s “central organizing principle,” his ideological agenda to polarize their role and the role of the ministers obscures the dialectical relationship that existed between them, and the many complexities of it. I will return to this question of churches.**

**And what is Rudd’s agenda? Not too difficult to discern: “The developmental method” [that Rudd approves] is often juxtaposed to Alinsky-style organizing, which is usually characterized as top-down and manipulative.” (Now you can’t beat “top-down” and “manipulative” for bogey man words, can you?)**

**He elaborates, ‘For a first-hand view of Alinsky organizing, see Barack Obama’s book…” Now I don’t want to take anything from the very smart and very talented Barack Obama, but one would hardly use a new organizer’s work under a supervisor who worked for someone who never directly worked for Alinsky or one of Alinsky’s major organizers as the source of a “first-hand view of Alinsky organizing.” Despite this inauspicious beginning, Rudd asks some decent questions: “Who trained him (Obama)? What was his training? Who paid him?... What is his relationship to the people he calls ‘my leaders’?” He also asks, and here my antenna quiver, “What is the guiding ideology?”, but let’s leave that for the moment.**

**Hope for clarity is soon dashed by the usual litany of anti-Alinsky-tradition organizing questions: “Are they (his leaders) above him or are they manipulated by him? Who are calling whose shots? What are the long-term consequences?” And, no, Obama’s book is not “a great piece to start a discussion [on organizing] with young organizers.” Might reading Alinsky, Gaudette, von Hoffman, Chambers, Harmon, Cortez, Gecan, Trapp, Ganz, yours truly and others who spent more time in the work and who were directly trained by someone close to Alinsky be better places? Not if you’ve got your agenda already in mind—which is what Rudd’s problem is. Let’s just talk about two things here that deserve serious discussion on the part of people who want to learn from the past in order that they might avoid the repetition of its mistakes.**

**First “top-down” versus “bottom-up.”**

**When SNCC’s Bob Moses first went to Mississippi, he had a list of respected leaders given to him by Ella Baker, a former Director of Branches of the NAACP. They were people with whom she had earlier worked. When Moses arrived in McComb, it was through local leaders that he began his work. Here’s a section from Wesley Hogan’s excellent book on SNCC, *My additions and comments are in brackets:* [] *or italicized*.**

**“…In July, 1961, when [Bob] Moses first arrived in McComb [MS], Webb Owens, a retired railroad employee and treasurer of the local NAACP, picked up Moses and began making the rounds to every single black person of any kind of substance in the community. For two weeks, during each visit, Moses conversed with these leaders about his proposal to undertake a month-long voter registration project. [*This idea came out of Moses’ earlier conversations with Cleveland, MS NAACP leader Amzie Moore, to whom Moses was introduced by Ella Baker. MJM*] Other SNCC staff members would come to help, he promised, if the community raised money to support them. At that point, Owens moved in as a closer. A smart, slim, cigar-smoking, cane-carrying, sharp-dressing gregarious man known in the community as “Super Cool Daddy,” liked and trusted by all, Owens solicited contributions of five to ten dollars per person [equal to $50 - $100 in today’s dollars; at the same time; in the same period, Cesar Chavez asked even more in dues from farmworkers]. Before the rest of the SNCC staff arrived, the black community not only supported the project, it financed it as well. [Footnote 7: Moses interview by Clay Carson; Moses, *Radical Equations*, p. 45; Wendy Samstein interview; John Dittmer, *Local People*, p. 103 (“Super Cool Daddy”).] “Surfacing here is one of the central causal dynamics of the civil rights revolution in the South of the 1960s. While SNCC people may not have broken down the recruiting process into its component parts, these components are now (and were at the time) quite visible: Moses would approach a local leader—in this case, Webb Owens. [*There is the preliminary component of getting an introduction to Owens from Amzie Moore via Ella Baker. MJM*] He then listened to Owen’s ideas and, in so doing, built a relationship. [*While listening is deservedly stressed, it is not all that Moses did—he had ideas of how to move forward in Mississippi, namely the voter registration drive.* *MJM*] Impressed, Owens led Moses to all of the potential leaders in the community, in the process exposing himself to great risks as a local NAACP leader. When he extended himself on behalf of Moses and asked citizens to financially support a voter registration drive, things began to happen. The quality of the local person that you go to work with is everything in terms of whether the project can get off the ground, Moses later explained. The McComb voter registration drive would not have taken off without someone like Owens. [Footnote 8: Dittmer, *Local People*, p. 104; Moses interview by Carson.]” *Too many discussions of “grassroots organizing” and “top-down versus bottom up organizing” ignore the lessons that are taught by this SNCC experience. Respected local leaders introduced Bob Moses into the local communities in which voter registration projects started, and asked the local community to financially support the voter registration work that Moses and other SNCC field secretaries were going to do. To the question, “Who sent you?” that might be asked of a SNCC worker, the answer was Webb Owens or Amzie Moore or CC Bryant or any of a number of respected local people who legitimized SNCC’s presence in their community. Where that beginning legitimacy was lacking, the SNCC worker had to earn the right to meddle by gaining the trust of locally respected people. SNCC field secretary Charles McLauren wrote a paper on invited and uninvited organizers, and what the latter had to do to earn trust which was the precondition to engaging people in “Movement” activity. Over time, the SNCC workers themselves became people to be trusted and respected—at least those who listened to local people, did good work and stayed the course—as, for example, Sam Block and Willie Peacock in Greenwood, but when they first arrived in town as uninvited organizers, they slept in their cars because no one was ready to open his or her home to them. Their steadfastness, willingness to listen to and respect local people, and willingness to overcome fear and confront local racist power all combined to earn them the right to provide the kind of leadership that organizers provide. This pattern was repeated by other SNCC field secretaries in other counties as well.***

**Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America by Wesley Hogan, University of North Carolina Press, page 59 and Footnotes #7 and #8.**

**Sounds like you could call that “top-down,” doesn’t it? But, secondly, let’s look at the ministers who are Rudd’s major villains because it is through them that a lot of Alinsky’s organizing was done. (It should be noted that in his black community organizing projects of the 1960s there were also block clubs, tenant organizations, welfare rights groups, and others. And it is true that the institutional anchors for the organizations were the churches.)**

**Rev. Aurelius Walker, pastor of the True Hope Church of God in Christ (COGIC), began his ministry talking with prostitutes, pimps, alcoholics, drug abusers and other marginal African-Americans on the streets of San Francisco’s Bayview neighborhood. He started holding small Bible study and revival meetings with them, helping them get straight jobs and kick their habits. After a number of years of this, he, they and others rented a store front as a church. The congregation soon contributed enough for him to become a full-time pastor. The church grew, bought some land, constructed a new building, and when I last was in regular touch with it had a worshipping community of 1,000+ people, almost all African-American, most low-to-moderate income. Internally members were organized in small support and study groups that were called “auxiliaries.” The budget came from the Sunday collection plate, pledges and fundraisers. When ORGANIZE Training Center was exploring a religion-labor alliance in San Francisco, organizer Larry Gordon talked with Rev. Walker about his church joining. Now I suppose you could call that “top-down” organizing, but I hope you’ll agree that calling it that obscures much more than it illuminates.**

**In the COGIC denomination, mostly black, Pentecostal in its theology, and mostly poor and working class, the way you become a Bishop is by twenty congregations deciding they want to follow your leadership. So if I were going to a new city hoping to involve the Black community, including Black Pentecostals, in an organizing effort, among the people to whom I’d want an introduction would be any COGIC bishops in town. And if I couldn’t get someone to introduce me, I’d sure find a way to meet him or them because they’d be a good starting point—not the only one to be sure—to the rest of the COGIC believers in town.**

**I won’t go into the polity of the mainline Protestant denominations, but for the most part they have elected boards made up of lay people who take their roles very seriously; they include groups within the churches as well—men’s groups, women’s groups, youth groups, a choir, a senior club…and committees—social action, stewardship, etc., etc. And if you think the way the Catholic Church works is that the Pope tells Bishops what to think and do, and they tell pastors what to think and do, and the pastors tell the laity what to think and do…you’ll sure miss some organizing opportunities.**

**Rudd is again encouraging, however, when he recognizes that he fell “under the spell of the illusion of revolution,” abandoning organizing for militant confrontation...and then armed urban guerilla warfare. But he’s still hanging onto a lot of new left baggage—familiar biases that would take more time to unpack. That’s too bad, because Rudd appears to be open to learning what mass organizing might be all about.**

**To resume with a few more of Rudd’s questions, “Are they (Obama’s leaders) above him or are they manipulated by him? Who are calling whose shots? What are the long-term consequences?”**

**Organizers influence people. Does that mean they manipulate them? Of course it depends on how you define “manipulate.” Any organizer I’ve ever known who ever organized anything wants people with whom s/he’s working to behave differently in the future than they’ve been behaving in the past. Otherwise, why the hell should s/he be there? A union organizer sent by “the international” goes into workplace and tries to get respected workers to form an internal organizing committee that will, in turn, influence workers to support the organizing drive, become involved with it, vote for the union in a recognition election or participate in a card check, participate in union activities and so on. But an internal “salt” organizer does more or less the same thing. Insider or outsider, in order to build a powerful, democratic, union she has to move people from point “A” to point “B.” If you don’t like what she’s doing, you call it manipulation: isn’t that what almost every employer calls what union organizers do? But I don’t think this is what Rudd means.**

**The more negative meaning of manipulate is that you have a hidden agenda. Most of the Alinsky-tradition organizers I know who are successful in the work are very explicit about their agenda: they want to build people power organizations so that regular, everyday, discriminated against, exploited, marginalized people can influence and, hopefully, shape the decision-making processes that affect their lives. That takes substantial people power. Building it is what these organizers do. Along the way, they develop trusting relationships with the people with whom they work. Their biases may affect the questions they raise and what they do. From my point of view, given the crisis of these times, they are often too cautious. But that’s a different point.**

**To return to SNCC for a moment. SNCC opened up new turf to organizing. The organization’s two major flaws that in combination assured its demise were, first, once the space opened up for organizing (when violence and intimidation diminished and citizens began to be registered to vote), more conservative and “middle class” forces in the black community generally came to the fore, and local black people who had emerged from SNCC work joined the poverty program. SNCC simply lacked the tools to keep the majority-poor in control of their movement. Second, and the first problem might have been overcome with time had this one not been so destructive, SNCC didn’t know how to organize itself into an organization of organizers. To juxtapose SNCC’s bottom-up to Alinsky’s top-down is, amongst other important things that I’ve already noted and more that I could add, to ignore the fact that SNCC failed to build black power that was an expression of the poor. Thus, for example, Fanny Lou Hamer became marginalized in Sunflower County—her home. And a number of years later when mostly-black catfish workers organized there, the black community organizations that were the descendants of what SNCC began failed to support them. A new book on Lowndes County, Alabama where SNCC people organized the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (whose symbol was a black panther) sounds like it gives rich detail on the complexity of the organizing process there.**

**No doubt Alinsky had his weaknesses. But there is much to learn from him about organizing that can contribute to what might now be a more transformative organizing process. In his warnings about a rightwing reaction bigger than what the student movement and other militants were doing in the late 1960s, he was dead on accurate. We still live with that legacy, and would do well not to repeat its mistakes. Close to the end of his CounterPunch piece, Rudd says, “we abandoned organizing when more organizing was needed to build a permanent anti-imperialist mass movement.” Substitute “mass movement for democracy and social and economic justice” for “anti-imperialist mass movement” and Rudd would be right on target.**

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***This is a slightly revised version of the published article.***