Interview with Holly Graff

Victor Cohen

Holly Graff was a leader in the New American Movement (NAM) during its most sophisticated and organized era, and was central in the negotiations leading to its merger with the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) to form the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Graff came to NAM while a graduate student in Philosophy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She had been active in the antiwar and Women's Liberation movements and was drawn to NAM because of its commitment to socialist-feminism and to developing a political practice based on Gramsci's analysis of civil society. While Graff became a member of NAM in Chicago, her first academic post took her to Pittsburgh, PA. She joined the chapter there and began working as a philosophy professor at the University of Pittsburgh. Graff remained active in NAM while in Pittsburgh, eventually serving on its National Interim Committee. In 1980, she left academia and went to work in NAM's national office in Chicago as a member of the three-person Political Committee. As a national leader, Graff visited NAM chapters throughout the east coast, and was responsible for NAM's political education program as well as its Socialist-Feminist Commission. After the merger, Graff remained active in DSA for a short time. For professional and personal reasons, she did not relocate to the new organization's national office in Manhattan, and in 1983, retired from her leadership role in DSA.

Today, Graff is a professor of philosophy and Chair of the Department of Humanities and Philosophy at Oakton Community College in Chicago, where she teaches courses on the women's movement, ethics, Marxism and philosophy, among other topics, and is presently teaching a course on the current global economic and environmental crisis. This interview took place on June 23, 2007 at Graff's home in Chicago.

Victor Cohen: You first became active in the New American Movement when you came to Chicago?

Holly Graff: Right. During college I had been in SDS. I then moved back to Chicago for graduate school, where I was active in the antiwar movement and the Socialist Feminist Women's Union here.

Cohen: That was with the Chicago Women's Liberation Union? What brought you to that organization?

Graff: It was a combination of things. When SDS broke up, it was very traumatic. This organization had hundreds of thousands of people and the leadership let it all fritter away, with ridiculous factional fighting and the ridiculous Weather Underground. When there is a

national organization with several hundred thousand members and a few leaders decide to have an underground organization and forget all those hundreds of thousands of people, it isn't a strategy for transformation. It is stupidity! It's *immoral*. At the same time, the Progressive Labor Party had entered SDS and was trying to take it over with their doctrinaire Marxism.

It was as if the leadership of SDS had succumbed to collective insanity and left the members who weren't insane completely at a loss, particularly young members like me. I didn't know what to do. I had been in SDS for four years when I graduated from college. I went to Europe for two months, and when I came back there was no SDS. It was gone.

At this point, I was just starting graduate school in philosophy at UIC [the University of Illinois, Chicago], and given the sexism that I had experienced in SDS, I was drawn to the newly developing Women's Liberation Movement and active as well in anti-war work, including participating in a major student strike at UIC. In 1970, I started a women's group at UIC with four other women including Sandra Bartky and Judith Gardiner. One main focus of this group was getting a Women's Studies Program at UIC, and this group soon joined the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, one of the most important socialist-feminist women's unions.

Cohen: What was so compelling about socialist-feminism?

Graff: When we first started the women's studies program, as far as feminist theory went, I believed I had read everything that had been written, a claim I can no longer make. [laughs] Socialist-feminism was being actively defined. It was very exciting. I thought radical feminism had many theoretical problems, and even greater strategic problems. If radical feminists were right about men, there was no hope. It's so odd when people in the right wing claim that men are the way that radical feminists say they are, that they are "innately aggressive and like to go out and kill people." [laughs]

Socialist-feminism seemed like it could be a potential synthesis of Marxism and feminism in a very creative way that allowed for an understanding of the personal dimension, the family, sexuality, and much else that had not been sufficiently incorporated into Marxist theory. I definitely viewed myself as a Marxist, but I thought of Marxism as a methodology for analysis, and that socialist-feminist theory could supplement that analysis in important ways and then be creatively applied. At UIC it was very exciting, both intellectually and personally, to be in the Teaching Collective. We formed to teach one of the interdisciplinary women's studies class that became the foundation of the Women's Studies Program.

Cohen: And it was around this time that you heard about NAM, and joined?

Graff: Yes. In 1973 Richard Healey came to town. He was starting a NAM chapter, and he moved into the collective house where I was living. I was very impressed with what he had to say about NAM. I

think he slightly misrepresented things; I mean, he described NAM the way he wanted it to be as opposed to the way it was. [laughs] He said NAM had moved beyond the perspectives described by Michael Lerner and people as already having reached a level of theoretical sophistication that was leading them to reject the early NAM emphasis on finding the perfect structural reforms. Richard was also one of the first people I met who shared my interest in Gramsci and my perspective on how his thought was applicable to our situation.

Cohen: How did you come across Gramsci?

Graff: Well, I was doing my dissertation on Marx and found Gramsci more or less on my own. I was self-taught. There were few professors in American universities teaching Marx because everyone had been cleared out.

Cohen: What was it about Gramsci's critique that made such sense to you, as an activist?

Graff: There were four things: one, Gramsci very creatively applied Marxist methodology to advanced industrial society, as opposed to a lot of the sect groups who had the most ridiculous and vulgar readings of Marx imaginable. Second, Gramsci really understood that in advanced industrial society, the problem was the hold of ideology. Obviously, the working class could take over and totally change society anytime they wanted to. They had that power. So, *what was the problem*?

For Gramsci, of course, ideology is the conceptual framework within which particular definitions of value and common sense are assumed. The hold of ideology makes it very difficult for people on the Left to articulate anything that makes sense unless they're talking about just simple reforms. When we talk about the transformation of all social relationships, we sound irrational and ridiculous to most people.

The third thing is Gramsci's sense of strategy. His belief was that people in well-developed civil societies had to contend in *every* institution. There wasn't one key place that you just had to be—it wasn't the state; it wasn't trade unions. Some places might be more important than others at some particular historical moment, but in general, if you wanted a transformation, you had to contend in *every single* institution. Of course, there was definitely a key role for a socialist party in terms of bringing people together who are contending in all those different institutions, but there was no shortcut, there was no "clever maneuver." Finally, contending in these institutions of civil society meant fundamentally democratizing and transforming the power relationships within them. Participating in and creating these changes was the only way to really begin the process of breaking with the dominant ideology.

I had always felt very torn. On the one hand, in the larger antiwar movement and earlier in SDS, I had been appalled by people not wanting to read Marx and not wanting to study the history of the Left—both of which seemed very important to me. On the other

hand, many of the people who did study Marxism ended up with mechanical interpretations of his analysis that had no relevance to the United States, or took the approach of "correcting" everyone else's thinking on the subject, like the members of the Socialist Worker's Party who had adopted as one main goal joining Socialist Feminist Women's Unions and trying to change the thinking of women in those organizations.

I felt a lot of hostility and certainly no common purpose with organizations that had these viewpoints. So, when Richard came and I found that we had so much in common politically, I was eager to join the organization that he was part of.

Cohen: Did you feel there was work to do to incorporate socialist-feminism into NAM, or that it was an uphill battle to bring that part of your activism into the organization?

Graff: There was never a time when I thought that NAM as an organization was untrue to that heritage or was failing to participate in it. Not that there weren't individuals within NAM who weren't really committed to socialist-feminism, but as an organization, NAM always had that commitment and that was one of the extremely positive things. That commitment transformed the role of women. In retrospect, that was the greatest strength of the organization. If only we'd been able to have the same thing in terms of race, things would have been very different.

Cohen: How did you go about building NAM, then, in Chicago?

Graff: Well, Richard did manage to start a NAM chapter in Chicago, but by then I then had gotten an academic job teaching philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh and was moving there. Richard told me, "This is great. There's no better NAM chapter in the country than the one in Pittsburgh."

So I moved to Pittsburgh and joined the large and vibrant chapter there. It included Roberta Lynch and Judy McLean, who were on the national leadership, and Joni Rabinowitz and John Haer, who were important leaders in the Pittsburgh chapter. Being in that chapter was absolutely great. It was well-established, and its members had positions in various institutions—community organizations and unions—important institutions of civil society in the Gramscian sense. When they came together, they were concerned with creating a socialist presence, and the chapter had a lot of openly socialist events. The fact that Pittsburgh is a medium-sized city also meant that Pittsburgh NAM really had an effect on the city in many interesting ways.

Cohen: When did you become a part of the national leadership of NAM?

Graff: Soon after I came to Pittsburgh, Roberta Lynch left to Chicago to be on the paid national staff. Judy and Roberta had been what was called "a pair" on the national leadership—you could at that time run for the national leadership of NAM and split a position

with another person. We developed this as an option to make it more likely that women—particularly women who hadn't had leadership positions—would be willing to take them. Judy approached me about becoming a pair with her on the national leadership, and we were elected together. Then Judy moved to Chicago to work for *In These Times* and later to be on NAM's political committee, and I continued in the national leadership by myself. I was especially happy to be doing this as NAM adopted the new strategy in 1975, which I regarded as the appropriate direction for us to be moving in.

Cohen: What was the national leadership structure in NAM like? As it evolved as an organization, I know it went through a few different phases.

Graff: At first, there was just the National Interim Committee—the NIC—and later, the Political Committee. The members of the Political Committee did not have any more vote than anyone else on the NIC did, but they were full-time paid people here in Chicago. And there were regional structures in NAM, regional meetings where chapters got together. Since there were sixteen people on the NIC geographically dispersed, each NIC member was responsible for visiting chapters in their area. That was one of the most interesting things for me about being a national leader. When a national leader went to a chapter, they were really questioned about exactly what was going on. It wasn't that a leader came, made a speech, and left. There was much more political give-and-take. In many cases there was really a close relationship between the chapters and the national leadership. And that was one of the strengths of NAM.

Cohen: How did the leadership and the members interact, or when?

Graff: For NAM, the yearly national convention was very, very important. And it wasn't a convention to which we sent representatives. All NAM members were invited to the convention, and a very significant portion of the membership came. This meant that there was a lot of interchange among members at the national level. And the national conventions went on for four days. There were lots of workshops, debates about positions NAM was taking, the national leadership elections, and opportunities for activists working on the same issues to get together. The conventions were very popular, and had a real impact on the local chapters—people around the country knew the national leaders because of the convention structure.

When I was in the NIC, I really liked visiting other chapters. I remember planning to visit the Baltimore chapter and making a humorous remark to the local leaders that I expected to eat crab when I was there. When I arrived, I was astounded that the chapter had organized a big crab dinner where you just put newspaper down on the tables and poured all the crabs in the middle. Of course, I had no idea how to eat them! We talked about politics late into the night. It was in no way unusual for a chapter to have this kind of relationship with national leaders. I eventually quit my job at the University of Pittsburgh to run for the Political Committee.

Cohen: It's hard to imagine leaving a teaching position in a prestigious university to work full-time for NAM. That's not an easy career path to take up, or walk away from. How do you remember that choice? Was it an easy one to make?

Graff: Well, at that time Pitt's philosophy department was the second ranked in the country. It was a great job because I got to teach Marxism and other things I really wanted to teach. However, the reality was that for me, Pittsburgh NAM was much more interesting. I was learning about socialist strategy among an incredible collection of people and trying to talk about what democratic socialism meant. It was really compelling and fascinating. And don't forget, through NAM I was meeting people from the surrounding chapters who were also activists with an interest in theory. I learned much more from them than I certainly could have from the analytic philosophers at Pitt. Of course, it was a total scandal—how could I get this excellent job and then just ignore everything that I was supposed to do? It's hard to reproduce or explain this situation now.

Cohen: It sounds like the work you were able to do in NAM matched up with the interests that drew you to study Marxism in the first place—and it provided a practical, rather than theoretical setting for them. Though that's sort of an unfair characterization of both academia as well as NAM, I think that distinction captures what it must have felt like to teach Marxism in the philosophy department, versus being in the national leadership of a socialist-feminist organization. Along with visiting chapters, what were your other projects at that point?

Graff: As a member of the national leadership, my two main assignments were political education and the leadership of NAM's Socialist Feminist Commission.

Cohen: As someone who was a part of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, you must have a fairly good sense of how socialist-feminism translated into NAM, or how much NAM was informed by that sphere of activity?

Graff: I think it was a very profound influence. I'm sure NAM was the first and perhaps only mixed organization to be socialist-feminist. When the big socialist-feminist conference occurred in Yellow Springs at the height of [that] movement, it was sponsored by a number of socialist-feminist women's unions and NAM. And there was a lot of political education in NAM around feminism.

There was also a lot of emphasis in NAM on the development of women's leadership, which certainly had a big effect on me. If you absolutely enforce fifty-percent rules, they work. But you have to decide they will never be deviated from, no matter what. They drove some men crazy, of course, since we had to have sixteen people on the national leadership and there might not be eight women with the necessary skills willing to run. On the other hand, you've got ten men with the skills and experience, so why shouldn't you have them in

leadership roles? Of course, the reason is things will always be that way if women aren't in those positions. You don't learn to be a leader in a political organization except by *being* the leader. You don't learn it by being someone's assistant.

And this was the same commitment as the Socialist-Feminist Women's Unions. But what traumas we had from sticking to those principles! The Women's Union would get requests for people to speak about what feminism is, often in front of very hostile organizations. Instead of having the few women who were really good at this do it, everybody was supposed to take a turn. I first learned how to speak in public as part of that organization. It was traumatic, but worked very well.

There were also several chapters within NAM that were exclusively women and defined themselves that way; this was not regarded as a problem.

Cohen: Blazing Star NAM was one?

Graff: Yes. They had been a Chicago chapter of the Women's Liberation Union; as an organization, it had different chapters, and they had been the chapter focused on lesbian and gay issues.

Cohen: You said your other main project in the national leadership was political education. When you look up "The New American Movement" in *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* (1999), one of the few topics that gets much attention in the very brief entry is NAM's emphasis on, and practice of, political education. What do you think was so valuable about NAM in this regard?

Graff: Well, the first thing I need to say is that we viewed political education in a very specific historical context: political education seemed crucial since the new strategy we adopted in 1975 meant that NAM members would often be working in arenas in which no one else was a socialist. Without an emphasis on real political education, it would be difficult or impossible for members to integrate their day-to-day work with their long-term goals. Richard [Healey] and I worked very hard on setting up leadership schools and other political education initiatives, such as the *Basic Marxism* pamphlet, which we edited and wrote large parts of. Again, I saw these not simply as general attempts at political education, but rather as a way to help NAM members implement this new Gramscian strategy that demanded so much of them, particularly in terms of being able to make creative analyses of their particular situations.

Of all the political education efforts with which I was involved, though, my favorite was the weekend Gramsci schools which brought together activists from a number of different chapters. I remember the first time we had a weekend Gramsci School—it was in Dayton, Ohio, the home of another really important NAM chapter. One of the interesting things about NAM was that some of the most successful chapters were in places like Dayton, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Buffalo, in what we call the "Industrial Heartland" region. There's so much training for people on the left in terms of organiz-

ing skills, but if people are going to be able to think strategically, they really need to know about theory—and it's very difficult to get activists to sit down and read thousands of pages of theory. So this first Gramsci School was definitely an experiment. One of the things we thought was that if we could present Gramsci's ideas orally in a weekend, and the participants could discuss their implications for their own practice and NAM's practice overall, then this could really make a difference.

And it really seemed to. Gramsci addressed the realities that activists confronted in their work, and that made it possible for people to grasp his ideas very quickly. The whole concept of ideology, which I struggled to communicate to graduate students in the classroom, was not difficult to communicate to the NAM members who came to these schools. It was a concept that helped them understand their own situation and gave them new ideas about how they might challenge people's ideas.

Cohen: Do you think a lot of that had to do with the heightened sense of what culture meant to this group of people, who had for the most part come out of the anti-war movement and had more generally been around, if not taken part in, the alternative cultures of the 1960s? Maybe a different way to put it is to ask, would you say that the social and cultural movements of that decade prepared people, and activists especially, for Gramsci's analysis of civil society?

Graff: Yes. Definitely. Even the commitment to feminism came out of that cultural understanding because there was a belief that even what seemed like personal life (or what seemed, to vulgar Marxists, like part of the superstructure) was crucially important. But NAM members couldn't always explain theoretically why it was important. However, if you've read Gramsci or certain socialist-feminist theorists, you could make an argument about why those cultural concerns were significant.

We were—especially in terms of the leadership of NAM—a particular generation. People are formed by those historical moments. NAM had two generations represented—the generation of the '60s, which really of course went way into the '70s, as we know, and then the generation of the '30s, who joined later.

Cohen: What about the people in NAM who were a part of the Old Left, or the Communist Party? Did they play a big role in the organization?

Graff: They were very important, more important than their numbers might seem to suggest, because the '60s and '70s generation were trying to reinvent the wheel. It is good to have elders able to tell you something. It can prevent a lot of mistakes. By the time NAM was founded, a lot of people who'd come out of the New Left really felt this lack. To have someone like Dorothy [Healey] in the organization was important because she did a lot of teaching, both talking *about* how things had been in the Communist Party and doing a critique of how things had been.

In Chicago, we had two people who had been in the Communist Party, Milt Cohen and Sue Cohen. Milt Cohen was never a leader in NAM; I don't even know if he was ever even on the steering committee. But he was very important because he was an ordinary member who never missed a meeting, who always did his work. As a young man he had been in the Abraham Lincoln brigade in the Spanish Civil War, so on the one hand, he's a hero beyond heroism, and on the other hand, he would never be late for a meeting. And what he could tell us, in terms of the past, was important and appreciated.

DSOC, on the other hand, had the generation of the '50s and the generation of the '80s. There was this *bizarre* situation where you had these two organizations that had very similar politics, but because of this generational split, there were very few friendships.

Cohen: I would imagine that these groups would have a great deal in common, though I suppose that's a very simplistic view of Left politics, especially at the personal level we're talking about.

Graff: Well, certainly some friendships eventually formed. There had been a geographic divide between the organizations, so there were very few places that both NAM and DSOC existed in a way that people would know each other or experience one another as a local organization. Chicago was one place that there was a DSOC chapter and several NAM chapters. Interestingly enough, in Chicago, there were no such tensions. There were joint members of NAM and DSOC, and on the local level there was no real problem with the coming together of the two groups. Part of that was because Carl Shier, a wonderful man with many years' experience as a leader in the UAW, had been one of the vice chairs of DSOC. He was a fundamentally generous human being and so totally committed to the working class that everything just worked out.

It was also very significant that DSOC didn't have the same kind of organizational life as we did. This was one of the major things we were worried about when we merged—that we would lose the distinct world that NAM helped make possible. DSOC, however, thought that our organizational life was why NAM couldn't grow. From their point of view, we were more like a family than a political organization, and when you're like a family, it's hard for people to join. They thought this was going to keep us from recruiting people who weren't like ourselves. It should be noted that DSOC, of course, wasn't really growing either.

Cohen: Looking back, what do you think about DSOC's view of NAM's inner life?

Graff: [Long pause] Both sides were right? It did prevent NAM from growing in certain ways and wanting to grow was the main *reason* for the merger with DSOC. On the other hand, NAM was something that worked very well. In all kinds of underground ways that would be impossible to trace, even though NAM has been gone for twenty-five years, the bonds between members, those ties, still continue to have large political effects. Take Chicago for instance—the

number of NAM members who have continued to work together politically is startling. And, certainly the reason they do it and the high level on which that work takes place has a lot to do with what they learned in NAM. Who developed ties with whom in NAM, therefore, has had a big impact on how things are right now. But, it was a strength and a weakness at the same time.

Also, the biggest, *biggest* problem with NAM was a problem that DSOC shared as well, and that was a lack of racial diversity. NAM was coming out of the '60s, the exact moment in which the most militant African-Americans would not join mixed organizations. It was a barrier we never overcame.

Cohen: Speaking of the merger, then—you played a significant role there, correct?

Graff: By 1980, I had decided to work full-time for NAM. I moved back to Chicago to be on the Political Committee, the full-time paid leadership. As a member of that three-person committee, I was responsible for the merger negotiations with DSOC. I worked very closely with Richard [Healey] and Roberta [Lynch] on these negotiations.

Cohen: When the merger took place, what do you think DSOC's interests were? What did they see in NAM, at least as you remember it?

Graff: Well, the person in DSOC who was most interested initially was Jim Chapin, who was their national director back then. I have no idea what he believed in his heart of hearts. I know what he *said*. I listened to it a lot. He said that it was ridiculous to have these two organizations representing different generations. Why should we be competing? But, whether really he was in favor of a true merger or just wanted DSOC to absorb NAM, I don't know.

Cohen: I think that's a valid perspective, that the Left has nothing to gain from competing against itself. And in terms of historical events, I think it's a fairly impressive feat, to have helped merge these two Left tendencies, particularly because DSOC had a history of being anticommunist, while NAM was (like a lot of the New Left) anti-anti-Communist. NAM even had people from the [Communist] Party as members. Did that issue come up during merger discussions?

Graff: Oh! Did it come up!? [laughs] You know, there were debates—*very* strenuous debates—in NAM about whether we should even talk with them about this. And it caused a split in NAM with the ultra-Left faction leaving—not mourned by those who stayed behind.

Cohen: I've heard there were many other differences between NAM and DSOC—which ones did NAM members have the most trouble with?

Graff: It was their view on working with the Democratic Party; it was their view on labor leaders; it was belonging to the Socialist International; it was their having a too hierarchical structure, with a charismatic leader. [long pause] It was actually *funny*. DSOC thought we were undemocratic because we liked Vietnam and Cuba, and we thought they were undemocratic because they had a leader for life who had to approve everything. [laughs] In the merger negotiations, we had to go through all of those things.

It was so complicated. The fact that DSOC had a youth section was always a source of tension, because NAM didn't even *like* the fact that there was anything even *called* a "youth section." We were used to the idea that the youth should be right in there, because after all, we'd all been youths and in charge of the organizations that we were in, so we couldn't imagine how students would willingly take on the subservient role that seemed implied by very term "youth section." And, of course, some of the younger people at DSOC who were in the youth section resented the people in NAM because they knew that we thought that.

The most *difficult* parts of the negotiations were things about foreign policy. Many leaders of DSOC were of the Trotskyist, Shachmanite background and particularly disliked the fact that NAM had critical support for existing socialist countries, particularly Vietnam and Cuba. DSOC used the word "communism" like it was a bad word. Our inclination would be to say, "Well, those aren't communist countries; there are no communist countries, but there are still countries whose efforts, however flawed, should be 'critically supported.'" That was a *long, long, long* debate.

Cohen: Did DSOC ever come around to your perspective on these questions?

Graff: Basically, the political statement we adopted sounded exactly like NAM wrote it, except for a passage which said we didn't like communist countries. Everything on feminism, almost everything else, was just what we wanted. That was the biggest concession that NAM made, and, basically, it was a paper concession. This was about language, and it wasn't about substance.

There was a big—a *big, big*—debate about the Middle East; this was the other major problem.

Cohen: That's what I've heard. When you say major, do you mean deal-breaking major?

Graff: Yes! Definitely. Again, there was a generational issue. The '60s generation had grown up not identifying heavily with Israel and concerned about the suffering of the Palestinians, whereas the older generation in DSOC *heavily* identified with Israel and even thought of Israel in the socialist sense. That's not the way that Israel seemed to people who were younger. Many DSOC negotiators did not feel we understood the historical importance of blocking anti-Semitism. And, again, we thought we *did* understand how bad anti-Semitism was and that Israel was doing self-destructive things that anyone con-

cerned with Israel's survival should oppose. This debate went back and forth, and it was very difficult. We eventually endorsed a political statement that called for a two-state solution, and it was a big—and this will sound odd—but it was a big thing to get DSOC leaders to publicly acknowledge that the Palestinians had just causes that needed to be addressed. They were finally willing to do that.

It was also significant that DSOC was open to giving feminism a new emphasis as well as giving gay and lesbian concerns a new emphasis—which certainly hadn't been their strong point.

In retrospect, I can see that this was very naïve on the part of NAM. We thought that agreement on politics was the most important thing for the merger negotiations. We should have, at a much earlier stage, asked different kinds of questions. We didn't because we—the leadership of NAM—just made all kinds of assumptions about DSOC that weren't true.

Cohen: Like what?

Graff: Well, the main one was how much money they had. The *main reason* for merger was the idea that the coming together could be more than the sum of the two parts. We believed that if NAM and DSOC merged, there would be no one who was a democratic socialist, no one who was a non-sectarian Leftist—*no one* could refuse to join that merged organization without being a hypocrite. They might have come up with reasons for not joining NAM, and they might have come up with reasons for not joining DSOC, but they couldn't come up with reasons for not joining this merged organization. Having a socialist organization with a few thousand people just isn't significant in the U.S. no matter how perfect its politics are. We also envisioned the merger as a large public event followed by a tour of many cities to launch the new organization. We should have been talking about this right away.

Cohen: I can see how the financial issues would naturally come second—the important work seems to have been creating an organizational space in which socialists of all kinds could find a home.

Graff: I actually thought the merger would only work if, over the long term, the majority of the people in the new organization had never been in NAM or DSOC and experienced the tensions between the two.

Cohen: Was there a sense at the time of the merger that the window for social change was closing?

Graff: You mean the objective situation? Yes. Someone would have had to be a little dense to not notice, although we had no idea *how* bad it was going to get. We had an inadequate understanding about how organized the right had become; they actually had done all of the things that we should have been doing in terms of participation in a broad range of the basic institutions of civil society.

I think one of the problems is that socialists find it hard to understand how greedy people can be and how people could voluntarily

choose to live in ways in which they exploit others. The whole spirit of the '80s, this idea of "greed is good" that became so predominant, was really a shock. We did not anticipate that at all.

I do want to say, though, that I think the merger could have worked despite the objective conditions. NAM and DSOC could have built an organization that was much bigger than the sum of its parts, but we didn't, and the main impediment was the lack of money.

Cohen: Right, because you agreed to everything, ironed out all the differences in political positions, had committed time and energy—the deal was already over, so to speak, but the resources to carry out the program weren't in place.

Graff: Right. We'd already gone so far, and our membership was ready to do it. By the time we discovered the truth about the finances, there was no going back. It just would have been impossible.

NAM never had very much money—even though our dues were fairly steep on a sliding scale based on income. DSOC got contributions from a variety of wealthy people and from labor unions. We saw them put on very impressive events such as the Democratic Agenda. It looked like they had money. But, I later heard Michael Harrington use the phrase "smoke and mirrors," and it was mostly smoke and mirrors.

Cohen: Harrington must have been a valuable asset to any socialist organization, just on his own, though?

Graff: Sure, and one of the absolute conditions that DSOC set for merger was that he would continue to be the leader publicly, although we did successfully negotiate for a female co-chair position.

I had great respect for him as an articulator of a socialist vision. He was a *really* great speaker. And he was willing to talk about socialism publicly—he would go to trade union conventions and talk about socialism. And he could talk about it in a way that would win people over. But he was very dominant within DSOC, and he had a following - people who curried favor with him. And that is not a healthy thing in an organization.

Cohen: So, how did the financial issue come to light, then?

Graff: DSOC was run by a national office with Jim Chapin and Selma Lenihan as Harrington's secretary. When we started asking for financial records, the person in charge of the finances kept refusing to provide them. It got to be this tug-of-war. So Selma intervened and found out the truth, which was DSOC was about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in debt.

She was very heroic in laying this all out in public before the leadership of both organizations. Harrington was furious and embarrassed, but if it hadn't been for the merger, DSOC might not have survived much longer. Their approach had always been, "We'll pretend that we have money and then people will give us more money

for this conference—then we'll use the money for the conference to pay the past expenses, and somehow we'll borrow more money." Ironically, NAM's finances were very conservatively managed. But at that point, right after the merger, it became necessary to raise a lot of money just to pay off the debt of DSOC. Everyone who could be contacted, from whom money could possibly be solicited, was called up.

Cohen: That must have been a real shock for NAM members, post-merger.

Graff: Most of the people who were asked for money were DSOC supporters, though some NAM members gave money too. As I said earlier, we had these plans to have a big national event, to kick off the organization, tour through all the greatest cities, and this did not happen. That *moment* was really lost. And it also left a . . . *sour taste*. It was not good for relationships. Perhaps even if all this money had been used to launch the new organization, it wouldn't have worked. But there is a chance that it would have, and that chance was lost.

Cohen: Since you mentioned it, looking back, do you think NAM's analysis of capitalism, or its vision for socialism, was up to the tasks that the '80s presented to the Left? What exactly did socialism mean to you, when you were in NAM? Has it changed?

Graff: [Long pause] The reason I paused is that I was struck by the way you asked that question. I'm trying to think, "Has it changed?"

I thought you couldn't have democracy without socialism, because to have democracy in the political sphere when all of the fundamentally important decisions were made in the economic sphere just seemed ridiculous. For me, socialism meant people taking control of their lives. I thought capitalism involved fundamental perversions of human relationships, and I still think that Marx's theory of alienation defines what's wrong with capitalism and helps us see that in a capitalist society it is very difficult for human beings to have meaningful, non-exploitative relationships. Capitalism to me is incompatible with human fulfillment. I didn't think that having socialism would fix all of those things, but at least it would create the possibility of fixing those things. And I wanted a vision of socialism that included women and an understanding of oppression based on race and imperialism.

I think my understanding has changed in two ways. First of all, although we did have some environmental consciousness, it was not nearly enough. It does seem to me the arguments for socialism become even more compelling when you understand the environmental issue and see that capitalism with its need for constant growth is just fundamentally incompatible with the survival of our planet. That seems to be kind of a major argument!

I also think most of us were fairly happy with a pretty *abstract* understanding of socialism. We thought that there could be a lot of varieties of socialism, and that you couldn't exactly dictate what it would look like because that would have to be decided by the peo-

ple who were building a new society and shaping their own destinies. How could we tell them what that destiny should be and how to do it? Now I think that inadequate. It is important to have a few more concrete ideas that would help people to imagine possible alternatives. In this respect I especially like David Schweickart's proposal and would especially recommend his recent short book called *After Capitalism* which presents a very compelling model for democratic socialism.

Of course, in the years since the end of NAM, capitalism itself has become much worse. In the US, capitalism seems to have lost the productive function that Marx thought it could have, and that it has become much worse than Marx ever anticipated. I think that Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine* has given a good description of this new phase of even more destructive capitalism that we now confront.

Cohen: When NAM would get together, would there be heated discussions about the nature of socialism? Did that change once the merger took place?

Graff: The problem was that not enough changed at all. One thing that was gone after the merger was the kind of national conventions where such a large percentage of the membership came together. I don't want to speculate, but even though there was this national structure in DSA, a lot of the national cohesion was exactly what was lost, at least for the ordinary member. I know if you have a big enough organization it's hard to imagine how all ordinary members come to a convention, but when you think of things like the World Social Forum, apparently a lot of people can get together and have interesting discussions.

Cohen: Do you think NAM could have survived on its own? Or did you see any opportunity for NAM to merge to the Left?

Graff: A lot of the people who thought that way were with the August Seven Caucus, who left NAM. They were very opposed to the merger with DSOC. There were people who were very against any type of participation with the Democratic Party, who felt we should only participate with rank-and-file movements within unions and never ally with union leadership. Some of the people who thought those things didn't leave at the time of the merger, but a lot of them did.

[Long pause] When I think about it, I'm not sure now the merger was *a good idea*. Rather, it was a good idea, but for the reasons that I have discussed, it didn't fulfill its potential; it didn't become the large democratic socialist organization that all non-sectarian democratic socialists would have to join. What if NAM had just continued existing as NAM? Was there another way to go? I'm not sure. Being in NAM took a tremendous amount of energy, and it was becoming harder and harder for people to give it. There were tensions within NAM, often between the people who worked the hardest and the people who didn't, because they both had the same vote.

And yet if you don't want just a paid leadership, or paid organizers, that will always be a source of tension. And that was one of the differences with DSOC—the majority of NAM's membership was, indeed, people who went to at least some meetings, if not a meeting each night. Back then I didn't understand that someone who went to a chapter meeting once a month was doing something very unusual in our society, and that local leaders should really be thrilled people were committed on that level.

Cohen: It seems the energy needed to do that work is almost unsustainable.

Graff: Right, but most organizations that operate that way do not have reasonable politics. That we were operating that way and had reasonable politics was unusual. But "a meeting every night" isn't as burdensome as it sounds. Often it was very interesting, and members would hang out together afterwards because they were friends. Sometimes it seemed like life was one long social event. The house that I lived in—there were six of us who lived in these two connected houses—was a post-meeting gathering place; friends were always there until midnight. People were falling love and having a great time, but we also did a lot of work.

But I am avoiding the heart of your question about whether NAM would have been sustainable in the long run. I am not sure—perhaps as a network that offered political education? But that wasn't the point since that would have not been an organization that could have grown. When I most regret the lack of NAM or the organization that DSA might have become is when students come to me and say, "What am I going to do?" It's not easy to give them advice. There are certainly organizations working on particular issues that are fine organizations, but there isn't an organization that can give them what NAM gave me in terms of education, contacts with people working in many areas of activism, and a chance to immediately engage in debates about socialist strategy and to quickly assume leadership roles. That was the best education of all.