Interview with Barbara Epstein

Victor Cohen

Barbara Epstein joined the New American Movement (NAM) while a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. After spending several formative years as a member of the Communist Party, U.S.A., Epstein realized that its vision for socialist politics no longer matched her own. However, her commitment to socialist politics had not wavered, and so when James Weinstein, a pivotal figure in NAM and a personal acquaintance, began a reading group in the city, she quickly became involved and was soon a member of NAM as well. In this capacity, she served as a member of the editorial collective of *Socialist Revolution* (later renamed *Socialist Review*), along with Weinstein, Carl Boggs, Mike Rotkin, and a rotating group of like-minded socialist thinkers, many of whom were not themselves members of NAM. In fact, while closely associated with NAM, *Socialist Revolution* was explicitly not an organ of NAM. Rather, it sought to function as a venue for the examination of radical thought in the 1970s, and its collection of history, theory, and political reporting provided readers with a broad overview of the significant debates in the developing political landscape of the post-New Left era. In this sense, *Socialist Revolution* epitomizes NAM's ecumenical approach to creating a Left politics appropriate for its time, and provides a clear and successful example of the way NAM members worked to establish robust institutions devoted to creating a radical social movement that reached far beyond the bounds of NAM itself.

Today, Epstein is a professor in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her book, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the Seventies and Eighties* (University of California Press, 1991) provides an insightful account of the development of the theory and practice of the new social movements as they developed into the 1980s, and *Cultural Politics and Social Movements*, edited with Richard Flacks and Marcy Darnovksy (Temple University Press, 1996) unites the critical reflections of social movement theorists and movement activists in a single volume that was given the Outstanding Academic Book Award in 1996. Her latest book, *The Minsk Ghetto, 1941-1943: Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism*, was published by UC Press in 2008.

This interview was conducted in Epstein's home in Berkeley, California on November 22, 2008.

Victor Cohen: Although you joined NAM in Berkeley as a graduate student, you have a much longer history in the organized Left than many other NAM members. How did you come to the Left in the first place?

Barbara Epstein: Well, first of all, both of my parents were communists. Now, I didn't know this. Both of my parents had left the Communist Party [CP] by the time I was five or six years old, and my father became quite conservative. It wasn't as if they were going out of their way to tell me they had been members of the CP. Nevertheless, I was growing up in a left-wing Jewish community in New York—Greenwich Village—in which left-wing ideas permeated the air.

I got involved in the Left, specifically, when I was in the ninth grade. The assignment in our social science class was to do a paper on the gubernatorial elections in New York. I went to a left-wing school, and the teacher said that we should interview the Republicans, the Democrats, and the liberals, and that if anyone wanted to do an especially good job, they could also go talk to the Independent Socialists. And since I just started this school, and wanted to do an especially good job, I went and talked to the Independent Socialists. What they said to me made sense. Then I went back to the Republicans and said, "I've just been talking to the Socialists and they say that capitalism is not such a good idea." This was 1958. The Republicans were not amused. They said, "What are you doing talking to socialists?" And I thought—"Hmmm . . . this is interesting." And so I went back to the socialists, who were mostly Trotskyists, and they invited me to join a teenage study group, which I did. Then I asked my teacher if I could write a paper on Socialism, Communism, and Marxism, rather than the gubernatorial elections. He said I could, and so I spent the year interviewing people in different socialist groupings in New York, and reading Marxist literature. By the end of the year, I considered myself a Marxist.

Meanwhile, I got involved in Student SANE—the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy—and became the chair as a junior, the year we were preparing for a national conference. The adults were getting worried about the radicals in the organization, and I was attacked as a Communist by the leaders of the organization. I was not a member of the CP, but they were intent on keeping the radicals from being elected. In spite of their attack, our slate was elected, and they decided to dissolve their ties with us on the grounds that we were a bunch of radicals. That happened my senior year in high school. And then I went to Radcliffe, was invited to join a secret study group which was in effect organized by the CP, and promptly was invited to join the CP.

After my experience in Student SANE, how could I not join? This was 1962, and when I joined, I was the third member of the Harvard Radcliffe Communist Club. The other two members were red diaper babies—their parents continued to be active Communists. The fact of the matter was that neither of them was very interested in politics. They simply understood that joining the CP was what you did when you grew up. One of them had joined the Party after the missile crisis. He asked himself, "What could I do that would piss Kennedy off most?" And the answer was "Join the CP." He called up his mother and said, "Ma, I just had my Bar Mitzvah." She said, "About time. Congratulations!" That was the culture.

Cohen: It seems almost hard to have become anything but a socialist in that world. You came directly to Berkeley for graduate school when you graduated Radcliffe?

Epstein: Yes. I came to Berkeley in 1966 to get a doctorate in sociology, hated it, and then went into history.

Cohen: And remained active in the CP in the Bay Area? What was that like at that point in time?

Epstein: It was a huge club. I had actually been called in by the leadership of the Party in my senior year at Radcliffe and they urged me to go anyplace but Berkeley on two grounds. First, what they really wanted was for me to go to the University of Mississippi to organize a Communist Club there. I said, "Forget it." The other reason was they had predicted that if I came to Berkeley, I would leave the CP within a year, and within five years, I would no longer be a Marxist. And the reason they gave was interesting. They said, "The movement in Berkeley is very chaotic and there's very little room in it for people who are not aggressive."

Cohen: By "chaotic and aggressive" . . .

Epstein: On the East Coast we had small chapters, and if you were a member of the chapter, you had a voice, and so forth. Whereas in the Bay Area, we didn't have organizations and it took aggressive personalities to make themselves heard. You had to be the kind of person who would get up at a meeting and shout other people down. And they knew I wasn't that kind of person. Within a year, I was out of the CP. They were right.

Cohen: Because of the personalities in Berkeley?

Epstein: I certainly felt drowned out. But I also felt by that time that the CP was irrelevant. By that point, the CP was spending a lot of its time denouncing the New Left for being bourgeois, and while I thought the Party was probably right, nevertheless, I thought that staying in the party was a sure way of not learning anything new. So I left. And probably by their standards, they were right when they said that within five years I would no longer be a Marxist.

Cohen: You were no longer a Marxist when you left the Party? In what sense?

Epstein: They had a very orthodox version of Marxism. You know, the industrial working class is the revolutionary agent. And it was true; I no longer saw things that way.

Cohen: Chronologically speaking then, that would have been around '67. How did you hear about NAM when it formed?

Epstein: We all knew each other. Jim Weinstein, the dominant force on *Socialist Revolution* [and an early leader in NAM] set up a

study group, and that was it. The study group actually met at my house, and people got recruited out of that.

Cohen: You knew the folks who began *Socialist Revolution* just as a function of being in the area?

Epstein: Right. I joined NAM and quickly became part of the editorial collective of *Socialist Revolution*. The fact that I was a former Communist was not seen necessarily as such as a good thing. Jim Weinstein had been a member of the Communist Party, hated it with a passion, and had left in probably '56. His positive model was the Socialist Party—he thought that was the way the Left should go.

Given the kind of madness we were surrounded with on the American Left [in the '60s], *Socialist Revolution* and the New American Movement made more sense than anything else I could see. I don't know if this was true elsewhere in the country, but in the Bay Area, Maoism was very widespread. And not just Maoism but the whole "Marxist-Leninist" tendency, meaning people who thought what we had to do was organize a vanguard party and seize the state. And it seemed at the time that the only alternative to that variety of madness was a different variety of madness, the countercultural variety, which said, "What we have to do is set up egalitarian counterinstitutions, and that's how the revolution will come," which was also wrong.

Cohen: By "counterinstitutions," you mean food co-ops, schools, or communes? And we're talking about NAM, now, correct?

Epstein: Exactly. Because NAM and *Socialist Revolution* were socialist-feminist, that anarchist streak was very much part of the organization. And so that debate always existed—are we about building counterinstitutions or are we about something else? The problem was it was never clear what the "something else" was.

Cohen: That was a part of the organization's mobilizing power as well, wasn't it? People were drawn to it because its utopian vision was fairly broad and open?

Epstein: Well, yes and no. The people who talked about alternative institutions were really talking about forming communes, for example, things that were more alternative than the socialist schools. There were also people who thought that real activity was important. I also remember pretty sharp debates over "Is the way to go building alternative institutions or is it engagement with politics?" Jim Shoch, who was on the collective of *Socialist Revolution*, felt that the way you know a movement has impact is when you can count the votes in congress that it's changed. So that view was not excluded from NAM, either.

These were these two sides of NAM and of *Socialist Revolution*. There was the socialist-feminist-anarchist side, which I just thought was wrong. I liked living in those alternative institutions, but I had no illusion that they were going to somehow revolutionize the country. And then on the other side were the people who were interested in

electoral politics, because that really was the only alternative. We hated electoral politics. Meanwhile, the American people were participating in elections, so we were marginalizing ourselves.

Now, one can completely understand why we marginalized ourselves under the conditions of that period, but I think that was one of the things that led the Left to be ineffective and ultimately useless. We're now at the point where we barely have a Left anymore, and a large part of it is our own fault. Now, it's not like somebody just made a mistake. To call it a "mistake" is wrong, because it wasn't as if somebody just made an error. After all, we're talking about mass movements and the sensibility of large sections of generations. And those sensibilities are not shaped by objective political considerations.

Cohen: NAM members really valued the organization for its ability to exist as a multi-tendency organization. Would this set of debates be a good illustration of how that was practically experienced by its members?

Epstein: Yes. There were certainly people who leaned in a more anarchist direction, and there were people who leaned in a more social democratic direction and the electoral politics side which eventually headed in the direction of "What are you going to do except form a merger with DSOC?" And there was an educational emphasis, but there was also an interest and emphasis in local politics. However, I think the fact that the socialist schools became the main project of NAM was not by really anybody's intention, but rather the failure of finding anything else that worked. Many people had had the illusion that the antiwar movement would somehow morph into a movement for socialism in America. And when that didn't happen, and there were just some core activists who were still there after everybody else had gone home, the question was "What were we going to do next?"

Cohen: What do you think of the merger, then, when NAM merged with DSOC to form DSA?

Epstein: At the time, I think I felt it was unfortunate, but you know I think I probably agreed with Richard, that the current that NAM represented was clearly not going anywhere.

You know, one of the issues that doesn't get talked about in the Left, but which comes up in this context in particular, is the fact that so many of us were Jews, not only in NAM and DSOC, but in the Left as a whole. Certainly, this wasn't talked about then, and it's barely possible to talk about it now. In any given meeting, usually two-thirds of the people sitting around the living room were Jewish, and people at the time people felt you were discrediting the Left if you mentioned this. I mean, they would have said, "Well, it's true; my parents were Jews." [laughs]

Cohen: "But not me . . ."

Epstein: "That has nothing to do with me." Most of these people were trying as hard as possible to be Americans. And they didn't want to think that the fact that they were Jews had any impact on what they were doing, either.

Cohen: That's an interesting context for thinking about "The New American Movement," considering that Michael Lerner is generally credited with the name. More to the point, though, part of his argument for creating a "new American movement" was that to be successful, an American socialism needed to be deeply rooted in the conditions of the U.S., in a Gramscian sense. But part of that, you're suggesting, was also a sort of left-wing assimilationist project, to become more American, both as radicals and in many people's cases, as Jews?

Epstein: I think that the Left was many things for many people. For one, it was was a route for the assimilation for Jews, in a way in which you could be Jewish and non-Jewish simultaneously. And it was also a way to carry forward the left-wing social action tradition of Jewish culture, but in a form that was totally American and divorced from any Jewish background, whether religious or secular. We were the first generation that thought we could call ourselves "Americans," with any credibility whatsoever. My father was born in a shtetl outside of Bialystok. Now that's unusual. Most people in the movement had grandparents who had come over.

In fact, the movement wanted a constituency that was working-class, and, preferably, black. The feeling was, what do you want all these Jews for? That had even been true in the CP in the '30s. Jews were a dime a dozen. [laughs] If you opened the doors, Jews would rush in. What the CP wanted was the industrial working class, blacks . . . it was a problem.

Cohen: And that was still true in the movement then even in the '60s and '70s?

Epstein: Oh, absolutely. Most people wanted to put their Jewish pasts behind them.

Cohen: When I talk to people who were instrumental in knitting together DSOC and NAM, they say how the Israel-Palestine conflict was one of the major issues they had to work out, in spite of the fact that there were socialist Jews on all sides. DSOC was very supportive of Israel, while NAM supported the Palestinian cause. From what I've read and heard, this issue was of unparalleled importance to DSOC leadership, easily on par with questions of socialist strategy, which for DSOC was also a part of a Jewish, and Zionist, tradition. NAM, on the other hand, as democratic socialist-feminists, strongly supported the Palestinian cause.

Epstein: Exactly. All of this contributed to making Jews in the movement [in general] say, "Well, it's true: My name is Greenburg, but that has nothing to do with who I am." I was on both sides [of this

particular issue] simultaneously, because I had been connected to Hashomer Hatzair, the Socalist-Zionist organization, when I was a teenager. And I had spent two summers on *kibbutzim*, and so I felt a connection to Israel and to Zionism that people in the movement didn't feel.

Cohen: How did you reconcile that?

Epstein: There really was no way of reconciling it. I felt totally powerless in relation to that issue. I thought NAM was better than the rest of the Left, for whom Israel was the cutting edge of evil. For NAM, it was not quite as black and white as that. But I didn't know anybody in the Left who saw the issue the way I did. I did think that the occupation was wrong, but I didn't think that made Israel, for instance, a more evil country than the United States. Nor did I think it made every Israeli evil. I mean, most people didn't even know that there was such a thing as a Socialist-Zionist movement.

Cohen: Although you had been involved in the Left since you were a teenager, was there a point at which you thought that socialism was possible in the U.S.?

Epstein: No. In the long run, maybe. But I never thought that we were on the verge of a socialist revolution. And earlier in the '60s, my view was very unpopular. I mean, if you got up in a meeting and said, "Look folks—it's not happening. We're not going to have a revolution here," you would have been drummed out of the Left. Of course, I thought that there was a good chance that we could create an ongoing left-leaning political culture in the United States. I saw that continuing. I just didn't see a socialist revolution happening.

Cohen: From today's perspective, what do you think of how you felt back then, not about the possibility of revolution, but the formation of a left political culture?

Epstein: I don't think it was out of the question. But what happened was that after the war in Vietnam came to an end, there was a rightward shift in the country as a whole, followed by the emergence of neoliberalism as a strategy of the elite which doomed the Left. But there was no way of predicting that. Another part of the problem was that we represented a particular sector of the population, students on their way to becoming professionals. We had virtually zero influence in the working class, and we had very little influence in any significant institutions.

Cohen: NAM's turn to Gramsci's analysis of civil society seems a logical move for a socialist organization to take.

Epstein: Yes. By the late '60s, early '70s, people started talking about Gramsci, and part of the context was that people were saying, "We're in a period that is not revolutionary."

Cohen: When you were involved with NAM and *Socialist Revolution*—was that a way to develop and promote that analysis in a positive and organizational way?

Epstein: Yes. Just because people shared part of the Left's program was no guarantee that they were therefore revolutionaries. What Jim Weinstein used to say was, "That's the advantage of having the Socialist Party." You actually have to have a movement that's in favor of socialism if you want to achieve socialism. That was part of his critique of the CP, that the Party used to think if people were militant trade unionists, they would somehow automatically become revolutionaries. And he often pointed out that this was not the case.

Cohen: Was part of the challenge at that point the fact that the movements of the '60s were generationally severed from the Left of earlier periods?

Epstein: I think that may have been part of it. But I'm not sure how much of the older generation would have known any better. We had a great analysis, which, frankly, everybody else shared. The reaction to us was, "That's nice. And what else is new?" The problem was that actually it was unclear what to do.

There was no longer a central issue like the war, which had mobilized the movement up until that point. Once the war was over, there were a myriad of particular issues that you could work on, but none of them had the dynamism and mobilizing power of the war. Certainly, feminism was a large part of the ideology of NAM, and a lot of women got involved in NAM out of the women's movement. I didn't. The problem I had with the ideology of feminism at that point was its emphasis on separatism. If you wanted to be a feminist, you were not supposed to participate in an organization with men. NAM had men in it. A good way to sum up what drew NAM members together is to say that we were a particular cohort of people who had been through the movements of the '60s and had not become crazed.

Cohen: And still wanted to stay active.

Epstein: Yes. We had not decided just to give up and do something else, but we were not interested in joining vanguard parties, either. As for why more people did not join NAM, I think part of it was that mass participation organizations were floundering at that point. But also, into the late '70s, you could throw yourself into working with a NAM chapter without any thought that this was going to create a job for you.

I think that gradually faded over the '70s. People kept saying, "You know what? I'd better get a degree." And by the early '80s, it was gone. People who continued to participate in politics by the early '80s had managed to find jobs for themselves doing so. And instead of organizing a chapter of this or a chapter of that, they found themselves running little organizations that would call demonstrations. People were certainly willing to come to demonstrations, but people

were not willing to put in the time and effort that we'd all put into the NAM chapter, because you couldn't. It was partly that people were no longer in their 20s, but it was also that there were changes in the economy. The [financial] pressure on people had really escalated.

Cohen: When I look at all the work, and the weekly and daily meetings it took to create and sustain a NAM chapter, it seems like a twenty-four-hour project. People in NAM were doing this for the movement, not because it would land them a job at USAID.

Epstein: Exactly. There is no space for that anymore—that's what I'm talking about. I knew a group of people who were active in NAM who shared a house, and each of them worked for about a day-and-a-half a week at the local gas station. And that was enough to keep the collective going.

Cohen: That's unbelievable.

Epstein: They were not thinking about "What am I going to do later?" The future seemed open. I had been a graduate student through all of this and I was lucky enough to get a job at UC-Santa Cruz, but when I got my job at Santa Cruz, it meant that I couldn't participate on the same level.

Cohen: Right. You had your career, tenure.

Epstein: Exactly. I continued to be on the editorial collective of *Socialist Review*, but you just couldn't put in the same amount of effort. My students today mostly work, but I didn't have to. The year after I came to graduate school and shifted from sociology into history, the Ford Foundation was giving out five-year fellowships and I got one of them. Now, the reason that the Ford Foundation was giving out these fellowships was that they felt if graduate students didn't have to work for five years, we would get our PhDs faster. Wrong. It turned out that we used the extra time in the movement, which was not their intention.

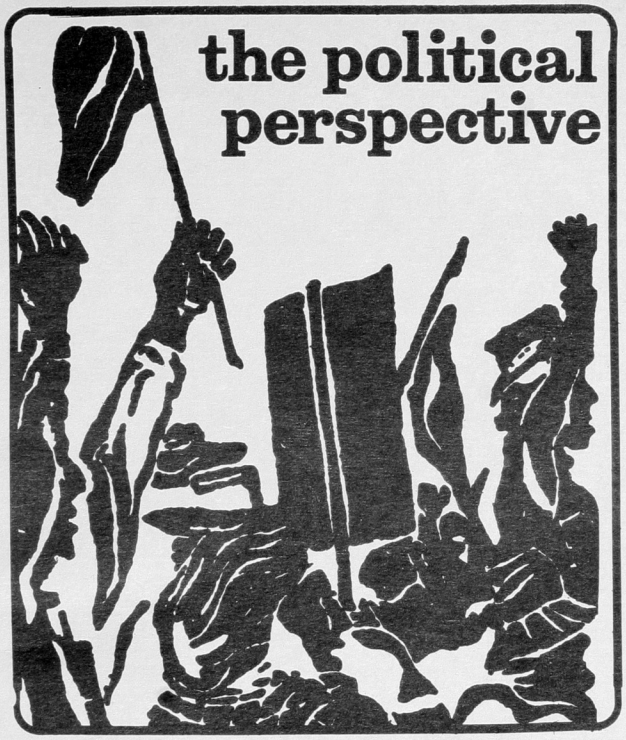
Cohen: I bet. I can't imagine the Ford Foundation knowingly giving money to graduate students for socialist organizing projects.

Epstein: No. We later found out that this money actually came from the CIA. [laughs] It was trying to encourage graduate education and they wanted to foster the more promising students. And this gave us time. Of course, money wasn't a big issue either. I remember that when my car died, somebody in my collective said, "Well, how much money do you have in the bank?" And I said, "I don't have any idea." Every month my fellowship check got deposited into my account, and I never needed it, so I never bothered to look and see how much was in there. It turned out there was enough in the account to buy another car. That gives you a sense of what I mean when I say that money and time weren't issues for us. We could constantly participate in political activity, and it was the glue of our culture.

Cohen: So much of NAM seems to preface the growth of cultural studies in higher education, while at the same time, it seems a great deal of what NAM stood for has been elided in the development of cultural studies. In your work as an historian of social movements how do you relate the two?

Epstein: What the academic Left took over was the anarchist countercultural current of the '60s politics that said, "What we have to do is transform culture," and which carried with it the illusion that you could transform culture without transforming other institutions. The difference is that most of the people who actually engaged in that in the '60s were hippies with no career aspirations. There is a contradiction there between academics picking up those politics and not noticing how they are moving through a quite mainstream institution themselves, while talking about cultural marginality and that sort of thing.

This anarchist streak made a certain amount of sense in that historical context. It was true the liberals running the state were a large part of the problem. But I think that in the wake of the '60s, particularly in the '80s and '90s, the anarchist critique and the attack of the academic Left on the liberal state has in fact strengthened the right. The project of the right has been to destroy the New Deal and the idea that the state has a responsibility for social welfare. Basically what you've had is the academic left backing that up. They're clearly not conservatives, but I do think that they have unwittingly colluded with and strengthened the right.



the political perspective

NEW AMERICAN MOVEMENT

V.
At-Large Members: Life beyond the Chapter