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Justice in the Streets

The conspiracy trial in Chicago seemed to bring the whole scene into focus. It would be hard to overstress the fascination felt by students here for the events in Judge Hoffman's courtroom. They became topics of daily conversation.

—RICHARD FLACKS AND MILTON MANKOFF

“Revolt in Santa Barbara:
Why They Burned the Bank”
(The Nation, March 23, 1970)

THE PRESS WAS SHOCKED by the violence of The Day After only because they had failed to cover the presentation of our case to the real jury of our peers. During the course of the trial we spoke in public perhaps 500 times. During the November Moratorium alone we appeared and spoke before a million or more people. At small schools where we spoke, often more than 75 per cent of the student body turned out. These were not “lectures”: they were political events. We addressed the audiences as our jury and asked for their support, considering their standing ovations to be demonstrations that would be heard in Washington. We said that our trial, unlike any other, provided an opportunity for a collective offensive by our generation against Nixon, Agnew and the Justice Department. It was true: the audience was part of the Conspiracy, all with a real stake in turning back repression. They knew it and they felt it.

We were not leaders in command of legions of youth; we were a myth in which millions could participate. We were symbols of what millions were going through themselves. It was not a one-way flow of energy between the Conspiracy and its supporters. We were moved and shaped by the collective rising anger of these thousands of others.

Outrage over the trial was translated into violence no less than three times nationally: in the October “Days of Rage”; at the Washington Moratorium in November; and on The Day After. Previously most radical violence had been in defense against swinging clubs. But on these three occasions people were fighting back against blows coming down in the courtroom. The only “organized” violence came from the Weathermen in September and October.

Rulers first fantasize their devils, then create them. We never did what the government accused us of in 1968, but the Weathermen did it in 1969. What we did in 1968 prefigured Weatherman: a few karate and snake-dance exercises, some disruption, a lot of running in the streets, and at the end of Convention Week a prediction that a fighting force would be created which would bring the war in Vietnam home. It remained for the government to develop this seed into a paranoid image of crazy, unruly, drug-ruined, club-carrying, communist-inspired mobs rampaging in the Loop, and for Weathermen to fulfill the image one year later. Many Weatherman leaders were shaped by the events of Chicago '68. When our legal protest was clubbed down, they became outlaws. When our pitiful attempts at peaceful confrontation were overwhelmed, they adopted the tactic of offensive guerrilla violence. When our protest against the war failed, they decided to bring the war home.

And so, even as we were sitting in court, the new revolutionaries conspired to come to Chicago to “incite, organize, and promote a riot.” Though there were only 200 Weathermen, the Days of Rage resulted in the destruction of a famous statue of a Chicago policeman, shattered windows in the Loop and along the Gold Coast, injuries to police, and a broken neck for the same corporation counsel who had moved with the front of our own marches the year before without mishap.

Several of us had deeply mixed feelings about the October action. We were drawn to the seriousness of Weatherman, for here at last was a group willing to go beyond the pseudo-radicalism of the white left into a head-on showdown with the system. The new left was rapidly becoming the old left, a comfortable left, with too many radicals falling into the ruts of teaching and monogamy, leaving Che and Malcolm and Huey only as posters on their walls.

But there was something deeply wrong with what had happened in Chicago. At first we could only understand the symptoms. Trashing Volkswagens, for example, was not “materially aiding the Vietnamese,” it was just plain random violence. And only 200 or 300 people had come to the Weatherman action, instead of the thousands the Weathermen had promised. To us, revolution was like birth: blood is inevitable, but the purpose of the act is to create life, not to glorify blood. Yet to the Weathermen bloodshed as such was “great.” They were striking terror into Pig Amerika, Volkswagens and all, and their tiny numbers would be unimportant, they claimed, in the vast myth they were creating.

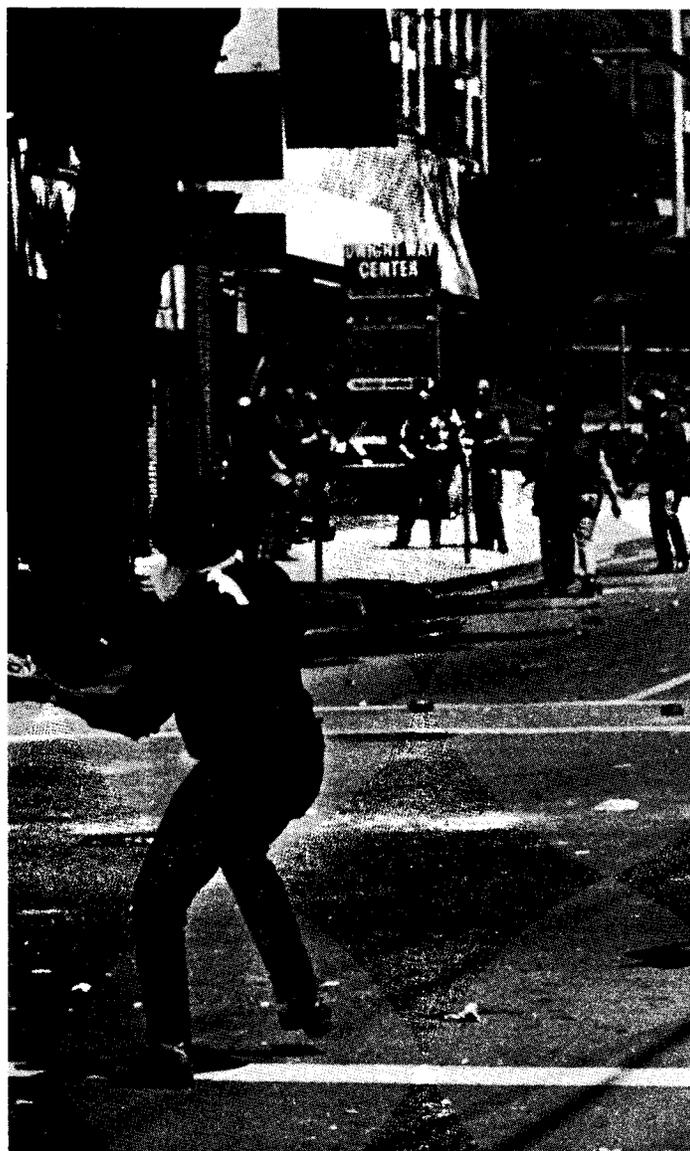
During the Moratorium a few weeks later, several thousand people streamed toward the South Vietnamese Embassy one night, then toward the Justice Department the next day. They too were violent, but their targets were more selective and meaningful than those of the Weathermen in Chicago. Abbie wrote that the difference was between structured, artificial violence (Weathermen) and natural, spontaneous violence (Yippie). The Weathermen believed in “war,” chose an arbitrary date and then just began it. But most young people could not relate to scheduling a riot, partly because of the debatable effectiveness of such tactics, but mainly because it was not a spontaneous reaction to an immediate situation. Weatherman violence was not dictated by a situation so much as by an ideology. Their violence was structured and artificial, because in their heads they were part of the Third World. They were alienated from their own roots. The privileged, funky, hedonistic qualities of youth culture turned them off. The cultural revolution among youth was to them simply more pig privilege. They were not guerrillas swimming like fish among the people; they were more like commandos, fifth columnists, operating behind enemy lines. Eventually, this logic would lead to their glorification of the media image of Charlie Manson as perhaps the best “model” for white youth. They were not the conscience of their generation, but more like its Id.

WE FELT, ON THE OTHER hand, that there was a genuine, legitimate, revolutionary consciousness arising out of the life experience of young people. We were not simply allies to a revolution centered in the Third World. As the misfits of a dying capitalism, we were oppressed in unique ways and had to

rebel in unique ways. Our revolution would be part of an international revolution, to be sure, but with its own style and content. Our will to struggle would come, not simply from the inspiration of the Vietnamese or the blacks, but from the imperative of preserving and expanding our own way of life.

There are limits, however, to any notions of spontaneous rebellion. Abbie’s criticism of the Weathermen relied too much on the alternative of spontaneously “doing our thing.” In the face of repression it becomes irresponsible and hazardous simply to propose that people go wild in the streets. A workable organizational machinery becomes necessary to push the struggle at all levels, including in the streets. In a sense the Yippies used Washington to push for militancy. Though having a base of support in the crowd, they lacked machinery. They were exploiting an event put together by others; the only people who were organized in Washington were the peace movement moderates.

We learned how organization and spontaneity could go together on TDA. We had *leadership* (the Conspiracy), *machinery* (the network of campuses where we spoke, the



underground press, etc.), *strategy* (massive protest by “our jury” as a reply to Justice Department intimidation) and *flexible tactics* (people were told to invent their own actions but to make them both militant and broad-based). If it was true that this was “our generation on trial,” no more organization would be needed.

That is why, on TDA, there was a riot across state lines that shook the country. Young people who had not come to Chicago to “bring the war home” were striking back now, for a purpose they believed in, with a spontaneity flowing from legitimate outrage because their collective identity had been violated and they could stand it no longer. Weathermen had created the tactics, but the fight was about us.

Tens of thousands participated. The youth ghetto in Santa Barbara exploded and the Bank of America was burned down. Stores were trashed everywhere. Bombs were placed in buildings from California to New York. The trial, which had been designed to intimidate, had produced insurrection instead.

We didn’t “organize” it; we only called for our jury to

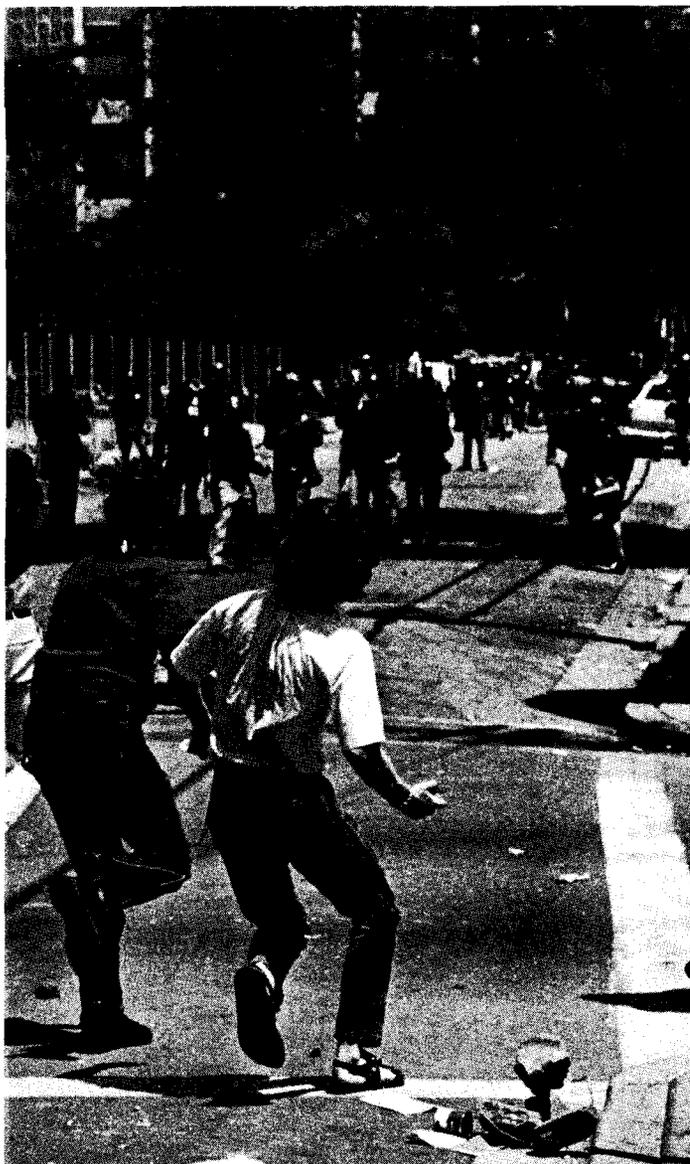


Photo: Alan Copeland/Photon West

reach its verdict in the streets. It erupted spontaneously. In Berkeley, the crowd wouldn’t even wait for the speakers to finish denouncing the trial. The form it took confirmed that more than eight were on trial. People riot when they themselves feel that they have been slammed against a wall.

We eight were not special men. We were just a reflection of the impulses of our generation. It was like riding the crest of a great wave, a wave made by the power of the people.

[X]

The Limits of the Conspiracy

The Stones are STARS—on tour if not elsewhere, automatically the center of attention and privilege. None insists on that status, but they accept its security with an equanimity both innocent and arrogant. . . . The Stones, and certainly Jagger, are the tour’s essential promise, and therefore, if not always right, never wrong.

All non-Stones are relatively insecure and in a constant struggle to maintain their own egos, and their own place, in the graded orbits around the Stones. While on the one hand there is an undercurrent of hostility to the Stones—why do they always get the dope first?—there is a stronger one of self-dramatization, a pressure to maximize one’s importance to the Stones. That, in turn, increases the Stones’ status, and everyone is more important if the Stones are more important.

—MICHAEL LYDON

“The Rolling Stones at Play in the Apocalypse”

(RAMPARTS, March 1970)

TOO MANY PEOPLE LOOKED UP to us, regarded us as a rock group, wanted posters and The Word. There were many good people who came to work on the trial with the hope that it would be a communal project with fantastic individual possibilities; but our personalities, and the structure of the trial itself, did not allow that. The truth is that although we served an important revolutionary purpose for six months, we discovered a lot that was wrong about ourselves. Even though our identity was on trial, even though our habits were truly radical compared to those of bourgeois society, that hardly meant that our identity and habits were revolutionary by our own standards. In different ways we all came to sense our own limitations.

Most of these limits stemmed from the fact that the seven of us are white middle-class males, accustomed to power and status in the Movement. The Youth International Party, all myth aside, is run by two persons, Jerry and Abbie. The National Mobilization, in its prime, existed as a coalition which revolved around Dave Dellinger. Rennie has functioned time and again as the brilliant director of an office-centered organizing project, and I have always been more of an independent catalyst than an equal member of any collective or group. Bill and Lenny too are accustomed to having a bevy of women and others working in a service capacity. We were not good about sharing power, rather than competing for it, among ourselves. We were even worse about sharing power with the hardworking staff that chose to labor in our shadow. The Conspiracy organization