

Reflections on SDS, Black Power, War and Racism, 40 Years Later

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...Fast forward forty years: Similar issues of war and racism continue to define the world, even if we've moved from the era of Camelot to a postmodern permanent war wonderland called globalization. White supremacy and patriarchy propel both the international and the national contexts. Empire has both a domestic front and an international one, operating with some similarity on both sides of the borders. The legacy of SDS and the myriad groups that emerged in its wake have helped shape the racial justice initiatives of white activists today, in the burgeoning critique of US global military hegemony and in the growing Left opposition to transnational corporate crime and pillaging. At the same time, this legacy is positively amended and altered by the queer and transgender movement, by the strength of women's leadership in activist projects the world over, by the passion for transparent democracy in movement organizations as well as formal political structures. Even when they falter, most modern US social movements recognize that they must in some way confront racism. While such considerations have sometimes gotten mired in discussions of group dynamics without sufficient attention to developing an anti-racist program, the Black Power and white anti-imperialist movements have successfully raised the issue of white supremacy as one the Left--and society--must deal with.

The ongoing emphasis on racial justice and sexual and gender freedom is not the narrow parochialism of a much-maligned "identity politics," but the strategic and dynamic centerpiece of Left momentum today. The task for people in the United States is, for example, to unite the democratic possibilities of the World Social Forum with the anti-racist militancy of the prison abolition movement; to join women's activism against fundamentalism with the emerging networks of transgender health and safety; to connect support for the popular rebellions in Latin America with support for Africans fighting the AIDS crisis; to link opposition to the wars in and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq with the ongoing struggles for justice led by people of color within this country. Former SDS leader Bernardine Dohrn identifies this challenge as "how to be internationalist and yet grounded here in organizing work with a real radical critique of American power and inequality."

The specifics of what such solidarity will mean in the new millennium are still developing and taking shape. The practical lessons are emerging in the student-worker alliances of Florida's Coalition of Immokalee Workers (a farmworker union comprised primarily of Latino and Haitian workers); the cross-border solidarity modeled in organizations such as the International Solidarity Movement in Palestine, School of the Americas Watch, and projects focused on conflict zones like Haiti or the Philippines; and in the local relationships being built in cities and towns across the country, centered on building organizations and coalitions committed to racial, economic, environmental, gender and sexual justice. Talk of dismantling "intersecting and interlocking systems of oppression" has replaced talk of fighting "the system." Yet solidarity remains at the root of movements for social justice, as they build toward a unified and global mass movement. They are movements united under the slogan "Another world is possible," with networks of resisters who have set out to bring such a world into being.

What is the contemporary context set by the most oppressed--communities of color in America and people of the Third World/Global South/Two-Thirds World--today? What are appropriate responses to systemic oppression? How can movements simultaneously exist in and relate to contexts that are local, regional, national and global? Who are the leading progressive forces in the struggles of the 21st century? How can the various forms of privilege and oppression be confronted? What is the creative range of political responses possible and necessary? The radical US Left of the 1960s and 1970s doesn't offer the answers or provide an instruction manual. But it does present a legacy of constantly raising and grappling with these questions, a toolkit that new generations can use to develop both a vision of a better society and the means of creating it.

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