

1960s Student Radicalism and the Problem of Poverty:  
Off-Campus Activism to Organize the Unemployed

By

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## Introduction

In 1998, the philosopher Richard Rorty observed, “Nobody is setting up a program in unemployed studies, homeless studies, or trailer park studies, because the unemployed, the homeless, and residents are not ‘other’ in the relevant sense. To be other in this sense you must bear an ineradicable stigma, one which makes you a victim of socially accepted sadism rather than merely economic selfishness.”<sup>1</sup> Rorty argued that the Vietnam War had fundamentally changed the old Left, which concerned itself with economics, into a New Left, which focused more on culture. My thesis will show that student activists organized projects specifically aimed at correcting economic injustice, and it will detail the extent of this activity until the Vietnam War absorbed their energy. By arguing that the New Left had its roots in a class-based focus on justice, my thesis will provide a more nuanced narrative of the New Left.

In 1963, Students for a Democratic Society launched its first pilot project in a big city slum. This experiment tested whether students could organize the unemployed, a kind of unemployed studies, to test the possibilities. Joe Chabot headed the first project in Chicago, and his first report in 1963, “Organizing Unemployed Whites,” contained pessimistic impressions of unemployed whites. Chabot found that his subjects “act openly hostile toward do-gooders, church settlement, government, etc, and effectively break all ties with these institutions.”<sup>2</sup> Chabot characterized their attitudes towards public education not as an institution that could provide social mobility, but rather as a place where “they do not like their teachers and their

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 80.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Flacks, “Organizing the Unemployed: The Chicago Project” in *The New Student Left* ed. Mitchell Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 134.

teachers probably don't like them.” They might have an older sibling who graduated. However, given that they perceived no correlation between graduating and a decent income, the unemployed whites disassociated education with success.

Chabot did not remain as an organizer. However, Students for a Democratic Society approved of establishing a new independent branch, the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP: pronounced EE-rap), which, with five-thousand dollars in funding from the United Auto Workers, and other contributions, would establish offices in Northern slums in cities such as Chicago, Baltimore, Cleveland, Boston, and Newark. In Chicago, the students located themselves in the north of the city, in Chicago’s Uptown, where an influx of Appalachian migrants came looking for work. In Newark’s Clinton Hill, the project dealt with a different demographic: neighborhoods that quickly changed from white to African American. The students also tried to generate a project in Hazard, Kentucky, where most of the miners had lost their jobs because of mechanization. The students aimed to organize the unemployed (rural and urban), and to organize people of all races because they feared a white backlash over the Civil Rights Movement. They wanted to facilitate an environment in which poor whites and poor blacks viewed themselves not as antagonists, but as common allies who could organize to achieve the same goals, as opposed to isolated groups battling over scarce resources.

It may have been unprecedented for students to take up lodging in the slums, but ERAP arose in a context in which the U.S. government deemed the fight against poverty a worthy cause. On December 8, 1964, Lyndon Johnson declared an unconditional war on poverty. In March 1964, the president requested \$962.5 million from Congress to fund the War on Poverty.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Biles, *The Fate of Cities: Urban America and the Federal Government, 1945-2000* (University of Kansas Press, 2011), 127.

By August 8, 1964, the House and Senate had both approved of a \$947.5 million annual budget for anti-poverty programs.<sup>4</sup> Title 11 of this new legislation-- rhetorically referred to as the War on Poverty; the actual legal name was Economic Opportunity Act-- stipulated that there must be the maximum feasible participation of the poor. A lot of funding went into building poverty centers, and Title 11 required that the poor must participate as much as feasibly possible at places funded by EOA.<sup>5</sup> ERAPers discovered that local officials often failed to adhere to Title 11. Knowing the law, the students would challenge non-compliance.

The existing literature contains three published accounts by the participants written after the ERAP projects had ended in 1968. Richard Rothstein published the first in 1968. Rothstein articulated the objective of ERAP as having three goals: to provide “inspiration of mass protest from the ranks of labor and liberalism; the achievement of specific, though minor, concessions to social reform; and the addition of poor whites to the ranks of the movement of Negro freedom.”<sup>6</sup> The ERAP experiment tested the possibility of these hypotheses, and discovered that they were false. By 1968, Rothstein perceived that everyone in the movement shared in the belief that “liberal-labor forces are not likely to activate their passive memberships.” However, he worried that no new hypotheses replaced the old ones, and that the student movement seemed “committed to jargon, less tolerant of organizers who wish to experiment.”<sup>7</sup> For Rothstein, the ERAP projects represented a time when the movement had more direction.

In 1970, Todd Gitlin published a collection of stories told by the unemployed people whom ERAP tried to organize. As with Rothstein, Gitlin also employed an activist tone: “The

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rothstein, “Evolution of the ERAP Organizers,” in *The New Left: A Collection of Essays* ed. Priscilla Long (Porter Sargent, 1969), 278.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 283.

price of this book guarantees that all but a few of you are no more than spectators to the way of life and politics in these pages...the fact that you are reading a book at all already tells a great deal about you.”<sup>8</sup> Gitlin encouraged his readers to cease being spectators. In contrast to Rothstein, however, Gitlin did not pose questions about the implications of failed hypotheses. He wanted to write a book about “hillbillies” and their migration to Chicago. To achieve this goal, he recorded conversations, and published these conversations.

In his 1988 memoir, Tom Hayden described his experience in ERAP. Running for a Democratic seat in his state of California, Hayden’s account diverged from both Rothstein’s analysis and Gitlin’s project. He did not discount the two-party system; he did not aggressively presume to know his readers by the fact that they were reading his book. He went in the opposite direction by recounting how he participated in Newark’s ERAP project when riots broke out. The New Jersey governor, having learned about Hayden’s presence in Newark’s slum, consulted Hayden about what to do with the National Guard. Hayden told him that the violence would subside, and not escalate, if he withdrew the National Guard. A day later, the governor withdrew the National Guard, and the violence subsided.<sup>9</sup> For Hayden, ERAP was more of a coming of age story than anything else. Furthermore, by claiming that he may have had influence in mitigating one of the more destructive riots in the 1960s, Hayden countered the other image that he obtained in the 1960s: the one of student activist inciting the police in Chicago when the Democrats held their convention in 1968.

The historiographical literature on ERAP also contains different perspectives on what ERAP meant. For example, in 1987 Maurice Isserman argued that the students who left for the

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<sup>8</sup> Todd Gitlin, *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago* (Harper, 1970), 404.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988), 203.

ghettos made a mistake to leave the campuses because of the success of the Port Huron Statement, and the appearance of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Isserman wrote, “It was as if John L. Lewis, having formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations, decided in mid-1936 that what he really wanted to do with his life was resign the CIO presidency and join Dorothy Day in handing out old clothing.”<sup>10</sup> For the historian Peter Levy, however, the ERAP projects provided evidence of a deeper relationship between student activists and class-based issues. He noted the success of the Cleveland project, where ERAPers helped mothers on welfare petition for school lunches and participate “in an AFL-CIO sponsored voter registration drive.”<sup>11</sup> ERAP fits into Levy’s analysis that the New Left and labor had a more complex relationship than the previous historiographical literature suggests.

In 2001, the historian Jennifer Frost published the only full-length book on ERAP thus far. She had feminist motives for doing so, and with very good reason, as Casey Hayden and Mary King produced an important document after involving themselves with ERAP and SNCC. They co-authored *Sex and Caste: a Kind of Memo*. In the summer of 1965, these two women voiced their objection to the fact that they participated in a movement that allegedly aspired to offer participatory democracy, yet nonetheless gave priority to male decision-making. Frost thus sought antecedents to the women’s movement of the 1970s, and she found a plausible candidate in the ERAP project.

One weakness of her book rests on her conception of poverty. Frost posited that the concept of “the poor” was imposed on the communities by the student activists. For instance, she

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<sup>10</sup> Maurice Isserman, *If I had a Hammer...The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (Basic Books, 1987), 167.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (University of Illinois, 1994), 338.

wrote, “Why did so many community residents tend to reject ‘the poor’ as an identity? Instead of identifying as the poor, community residents considered other aspects of identity more salient for organizing.”<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, the poor did *identify* as the poor. Uptown residents, on September 11, 1965, marched to city hall with a banner stating: “Poor People’s Power.” Uptown residents also identified as poor in the articles that they wrote in the newsletter that the student activists printed. For example, in the September 23, 1966 edition, Peggy Terry titled her essay “War on the Poor.” Frost made the further mistake by claiming that later on in the decade poor people in general did not identify with being poor. Martin Luther King Jr. initiated a Poor People’s Campaign in 1968.

Frost’s work and my thesis have different aims. She recognizes the important role that ERAP played in preparing women for their own movement. A few former ERAP members who worked in Chicago became part of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, which functioned as an underground abortion service. Frost linked women’s liberation to ERAP in terms of welfare reform. She writes, “The struggle for welfare rights *was* a movement for women’s liberation.”<sup>13</sup> By showing an involvement of both ex-ERAPers, and a few of the unemployed woman whom they tried to organize, Frost persuasively argues that ERAP had the impact of getting people to organize after the projects had ended.

She published her book in 2001, five years after the Clinton administration substantially reformed welfare.<sup>14</sup> The congressman Charles Rangel said, “my president will boldly throw one

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<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Frost, *An Interracial Movement of the Poor* (New York University Press, 2001), 133.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>14</sup> The Republicans had majorities in the House and Senate when the Clinton administration signed welfare reform. For an analysis of this reform see James Ziliak, *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families* (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015).

million into poverty.”<sup>15</sup> Frost’s work covers the women’s movement, and the welfare rights activism of the 1970s. Clinton’s overhaul of welfare is thus not integral to her argument, whereas what happened to welfare reform fits into my thesis. My thesis focuses on a period when student activists focused their energy on class issues precisely because a Democratic president would put one million people into poverty. Chapter 1 will focus on the people whom the students tried to organize. This chapter will focus exclusively on the project in Chicago. By contrast, Chapter 2 will focus on and analyze the students’ perceptions of what they thought the movement meant. For example, they questioned whether their initiatives were revolutionary, or reformist. Finally, Chapter 3 focuses on the single, rural project in Hazard, Kentucky. I will show how this project was both similar and different from big city projects.

The continuity of student activism since the 1960s is questionable, and at this time a very important question. After yet another high school shooting on February 14, 2018 at Stoneman Douglas high school in Florida, students across the country organized and challenged politicians. The students are determined to make change. What will happen when they go into the universities? If they get into Yale, they will be in a culture that restricts specific types of Halloween costumes that are considered offensive. If they get into any other university other than the University of Chicago, which says it protects free speech, they will likely be around social justice warriors who will prohibit conservative speakers from giving lectures on the campus. The conservative Ben Shapiro cannot speak at many public universities, and when he can speak, it costs half a million dollars to provide security. I agree with Rorty’s analysis that the

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<sup>15</sup> Biles, 328.

Old Left was concerned with economics, whereas the New Left is focused on culture. Stoneman Douglas proves that students are capable of activism that has substance. High school students face the threat of a gunman entering their school, whereas college students are protesting people who have different ideas. By writing about ERAP, I hope to provide an example of a different kind of activism than is currently found on college campuses in the United States.

## Chapter 1

### Off-campus and in Chicago

In 1965, sixty-two year old Ras Bryant spent many mornings distributing leaflets to underemployed and unemployed people in Chicago's Uptown. Ras had only one arm. At the age of sixteen he had accidentally shot a bullet into his left arm. This disability did not stop him from working in the mines, where he had begun his first job when he was twelve years old in West Virginia. "I've loaded coal with one hand...I can dig a hillside and plow all day just as good as a man with two hands."<sup>16</sup> He ceased to work in the mines not because of physical disability, but because the mining company forced its employees to sign a "yaller dog," a contract which restricted its employees from joining a union.<sup>17</sup> Bryant refused, and he took to selling moonshine instead. He received a short prison sentence for illegally selling alcohol. He also served ten years in prison for stabbing a man who tried to steal his alcohol. He hoped for parole when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour.<sup>18</sup> By his account, war would be preferable to prison, but the judge refused to release him. After serving time, Bryant migrated from the South to Chicago, to look for work. Employment was not forthcoming, and Bryant found himself moving around different apartment buildings in Uptown for various reasons, such as his own alcoholism and the problems it caused with landlords. Bryant perpetually did not keep his apartment clean, which displeased the landlords; the landlords did not make needed repairs, which infuriated Bryant. Because perpetual moving caused delays in welfare checks, Bryant found himself in a situation

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<sup>16</sup> Todd Gitlin, *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago* (Harper and Row, 1970), 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

where he wanted to do something about the administration of welfare. This was when his life intersected with the student activists who tried to organize the unemployed, and how a sixty-two year old migrant from the South ended up distributing leaflets in Chicago's lower-class district.

This chapter will focus on the lower-class residents of Chicago's Uptown in order to get into the world of the people whom the student activists tried to organize. Along with leaflets, which Bryant and other Uptown residents would distribute, typically to people as they entered unemployment offices, the students and the people from the community also created a weekly newsletter, a kind of press for the disenfranchised. With this press, they drafted a Welfare Bill of Rights: a document containing ten rights, which welfare recipients had framed themselves, in collaboration with the student activists. The students named this project JOIN, which stood for Jobs or Income Now. Underlying the motives that drove students to establish a press and a Welfare Bill of Rights was the ERAP hypothesis (Economic Research and Action Project), which consisted in the students' reinterpretation of Marxism. Instead of the working-class as the vehicle of social change, the underclass would be the vehicle of social change; instead of the campus as the place for student activism, the ghetto would be the place for social change. By contrast, the kinds of people whom they tried to organize operated on a more modest hypothesis: Northern cities such as Chicago offered more economic opportunities than the rural South. Migrants searched for employment, whereas the students hoped that the unemployed could generate a revolution. Not finding work, and dissatisfied with the way in which the welfare state functioned, people such as Ras Bryant worked with the student activists, despite the fact that they did not share the same ideals. This chapter is about the unemployed, and what they

understood to be a fair society. What does a democratic society look like from the perspective of the poor?

John Dawson, who was in his forties when he met with JOIN, had the conviction that the government should abolish hiring agencies such as Jobs Unlimited. He proposed that the government should run these agencies because of private agencies' predatory nature. "You get hurt on the job through one a them places, they'll tell you the hell with you right quick."<sup>19</sup> He broke his arm on the job because one of his colleagues, who was also recruited by Jobs Unlimited, happened to show up to work drunk. The man dropped a box on Dawson, which threw Dawson in between two machines that broke his arm.

He went back to Jobs Unlimited, where he was told that his arm was not broken, but sprained. The injury was not serious, and therefore Jobs Unlimited did not need to pay for any medical expenses. The company was not liable for sending a drunk man to work. Dawson, who really did have a broken arm, visited a lawyer before going to the hospital. The lawyer took him immediately to see a doctor, and the lawyer helped Dawson with his legal troubles. He sued Jobs Unlimited for not having insurance, and for its refusal to pay for a doctor. The trouble that Dawson went through illustrated how difficult working conditions could be for people who did not belong to a union, or for people who did not have a higher education. Dawson had a grade 8 education. Private agencies such as Jobs Unlimited took advantage of people like him.

If Dawson held pro-union ideals, and believed that work agencies should be government run, his wife-- Etta Dawson-- also maintained strong beliefs about how resources should be distributed: "They ought to ship all the men to Africa [this was not a racial slur: she meant all

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 95.

men] and let them give us our checks so we don't have worry."<sup>20</sup> She said this because her husband spent the welfare check on alcohol before he could pay rent. This was not the first time that the Dawsons had to worry about lodging-- they had met with JOIN after John got into a dispute with the manager of the hotel in which he and Etta were staying. They had seen JOIN's office in the Uptown neighborhood, and thought that JOIN could be of assistance, as JOIN claimed to assist with tenant-landlord problems. JOIN could not do anything for John and Etta because they lived in a hotel. Nevertheless, John and Etta attended meetings.

The 1964 Welfare Bill of Rights expressed the grievances that people such as Ras Bryant, and John and Etta Dawson had with the welfare state.<sup>21</sup> The document contained ten articles that articulated basic rights for welfare recipients. Article 1 stated that welfare recipients had a right to welfare. Welfare recipients wanted respect from their caseworkers, and more broadly from charitable organizations. Etta Dawson found it cruel that certain charities would provide clothing for children of parents who received welfare, but the children had to obtain the clothing themselves. She observed that this process must have humiliated the children, and thought that it would be better if the parents could pick up the clothing.<sup>22</sup> Article 2 stated that welfare recipients had the right to control welfare. Welfare recipients wanted an elected appeals board consisting of welfare recipients, who would mediate problems between welfare recipients and welfare officials. And if possible, welfare recipients should be hired as welfare officials, even if they were competing with college graduates for these jobs. The logic rested on the idea that poor people knew the problems of poor people better than middle class people did. This

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>21</sup> *Welfare Bill of Rights*. Box 21, Folder 1, SDS Papers 1958-1970, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI. Cited hereafter as SDS Papers.

<sup>22</sup> Gitlin, 101.

article also fitted into Title 11 of the War on Poverty legislation, which stipulated the Maximum Feasible Participation of the poor wherever War on Poverty funds were distributed. Article 7 posited the right to property. To receive public aid, recipients “should not have to sell cars, TV’s, appliances, health and life insurance.” The working-class could afford these novelties in postwar America. The unemployed, facing what they perceived to be temporary setbacks, felt that they should be able to keep these kinds of goods. By protecting property rights, the Welfare Bill of Rights would “help people get on their feet, not hold them down.” Article 8 demanded that the children of welfare recipients not be unjustly taken away by the state. Unlike Article 7, Article 8 was not unconditional. It did not demand that under all circumstances welfare recipients have the right to their children; it demanded better legal services, to assist welfare recipients in danger of losing their children. Often, the state took welfare recipients’ children away because judges automatically took the caseworkers’ recommendations. The framers of the Welfare Bill of Rights simply wanted the right to a fair hearing for those who could not afford adequate legal representation.

Articles One through Nine reflected welfare recipients’ basic and understandable desires. Not surprisingly, recipients wanted respect, control, private property, and the right to raise their children. Article 10, by contrast, while far from irrelevant to welfare recipients, embodied more the hopes of the student activists. Article 10 stipulated that welfare recipients had the right to organize. One Uptown resident, Juanita Simpson, said that “Picketing was for people who do not have kids.”<sup>23</sup> If organizing meant picketing, certain people such as Juanita were uninterested

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<sup>23</sup> Gitlin, 344.

because they were too busy raising their children. What historical events led the students to think that a mass amount of unemployed people would organize to start a revolution?

Discontent with labor unions helps explain why the students thought that the unemployed, rather than the working-class, would be the new vehicle for social change. The sixties were relatively prosperous years in U.S. history. Many people did benefit from the rise of labor sparked by Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s. In 1935, the National Labor Relations Act stipulated that employees could not be fired for joining a union, which legally enabled labor unions to use their bargaining power.<sup>24</sup> That act arose in the middle of America's Great Depression, and by the boom years of the 1950s and 1960s, it helped ensure that those who did belong to a union benefited economically. People from the working-class were able to buy homes, automobiles, and appliances. However, the benefits applied to an exclusive set of people: whites who belonged to a union, and who had been members for a sufficient amount of time. Africans Americans did enjoy some postwar prosperity. However, many African Americans had not accumulated enough seniority to protect themselves when the labor market changed.<sup>25</sup> The historian Thomas Sugrue has argued that decentralization—the moving of manufacturing from cities to more rural areas—also created a greater racial divide among the unions.<sup>26</sup> Railway lines and proximity to water contributed to the growth of American cities. By the fifties, however, extensive highways made the transportation of manufacturing feasible in more rural locations, which served industrialists' economic interests. Cities required higher taxes for infrastructure, which cut into corporate profits, and the dispersion of factories also promised a lower

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 81.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 144

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 121.

concentration of union members in a specific area.<sup>27</sup> Decentralization contributed to the rise of the ghetto because white homeowners harassed African Americans who tried to move into white suburbs. White homeowners guarded their property. They feared that their property values would decrease if African Americans moved into the neighborhoods. In Detroit, Sugrue argues that one of the city's largest grassroots organizations emerged to prevent blacks from residing in white neighborhoods. (ERAP, notably, attempted to prevent such grassroots organizing with its own grassroots organizing.) Most real estate agents, catering to the white desire for segregation, refused to sell homes to African Americans.

Automation-- the replacement of human jobs by machines-- also posed problems for low skilled workers.<sup>28</sup> In 1960, Charles Denby wrote, "At union election time, Reuther [the president of United Auto Workers] comes out with big programs on what to do with the millions of workers thrown into unemployment by Automation, on "profit sharing," on the shorter work week. But he drops these on the way to the bargaining table."<sup>29</sup> Daniel Bell, in 1960, agreed with Denby: "It is evident that automation will produce disruptions; and many workers, particularly older ones, may find it difficult to ever find suitable jobs again."<sup>30</sup> Bell, however, conjectured that automation would not result in any greater "social disruptions which follow shifts in taste, or substitutions in products, or changes in more...the fact that young people now marry at an earlier age has produced a sharp slump in textile and clothing industries, for marrying earlier means that one dresses up less, dresses more casually, and spends more of the family budget for house and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Denby, "Workers Battle Automation," in *The New Left: A collection of Essays* (Porter Sargeant, 1969), 159.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), 109.

furniture.”<sup>31</sup> With these conditions in mind, especially the uncertainty of what automation would entail, the ERAP students speculated that the number of the unemployed would vastly increase, thereby creating a demographic that might be big enough for a revolution.

Here is an example of how they interacted with the already unemployed. “I handed the director the paper from JOIN on the welfare Bill of Rights. He didn't say anything about it, just read it,” wrote Ras Prichard in JOIN's July 28, 1965 newsletter.<sup>32</sup> The director was new to Chicago's Urban Progress Center. Prichard, a welfare recipient, detailed his experience of going to the Progress Center with twelve other people, one of whom had seven children, an alcoholic boyfriend, and a delayed welfare check. The new director claimed that her problems were common, but that not much could be done. This was in Prichard's first paragraph. Prichard wrote about himself, and how he had needed assistance for the last two months. The director vaguely assured him that “he would try to do something.” Facing such frustration, Prichard recounted how he showed the welfare Bill of Rights to the director of the Urban Progress Center. The director knew what to say to Prichard and the woman who had seven children, but he had no ready made answers to a welfare Bill of Rights.

Alongside Prichard's headlines, four other articles appeared on the front page of the newsletter. All covered the same theme, even if they contained some contradictory assessments of manners. For example, Mrs. Richardson judged the man from welfare as cooperative, whereas Wilson Hanna claimed that the head of the welfare office did not give “the women from JOIN a chance.” It was not clear whether they were talking about the same man, but they were certainly

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ras Prichard, “JOIN Sees New Boss at Urban Center,” *JOIN Newsletter* (July 28, 1965), Box 20, Folder 2, SDS Papers.

talking about the same department, and arriving at different conclusions to tell the readership of JOIN's newsletter. A cooperative character, though, does not solve the problem of poverty. Mrs. Richardson interpreted the men at the welfare office as cooperative but confused, and as unable to manage the economic problems of the USA's poorest citizens. Some of the actions that members took indubitably must have caused bewilderment, as Wilson Hanna recounted how he, just like Prichard, had distributed the welfare Bill of Rights, but in his case to the head of the local welfare department. After giving the director the document, and hearing about which parts of the document the director agreed or disagreed with, Hanna recounted how he and others picketed the welfare office until it closed at four.

The JOIN newsletter kept its readership informed about developments within the community. For example, articles emerged detailing the progress of a petition that requested funds for a new playground. In spring 1965, JOIN took a survey of the residents of the 4800 block of Winthrop.<sup>33</sup> It questioned them on whether a little used parking lot should be turned into a playground for their children. 227 out of 231 residents voted in favour of transforming the empty parking lot into a playground. Oscar Perez published these results in the June 8, 1965 edition of the JOIN newsletter. In addition to releasing the results, Perez also wrote what JOIN did with these results: "There was seven persons, we went to the alderman and let him know that we was down there to give him the ballots..."<sup>34</sup> Perez vocalized to the alderman that JOIN was a democratic organization that served the interests of poor people. As a representative of the city of Chicago, it was incumbent on Alderman O'Rourke to ensure that this democratic referendum

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<sup>33</sup> *JOIN Newsletter* (May 15, 1965), Box 20, Folder 3, SDS Papers.

<sup>34</sup> Oscar Perez, "JOIN moves in on Playground," *JOIN Newsletter* (June 8, 1965), Box 20, Folder 3, SDS Papers.

reached City Hall. (John Dawson had also petitioned Alderman O'Rourke to get rid of private agencies like Jobs Unlimited, to no avail.)

By August 12, fourteen members of JOIN met briefly with Park Commissioner Thomas Berry; double the number of people who had initially met with Alderman O'Rourke. Moreover, JOIN's coverage of this event described the meeting as a confrontation with the Park Commissioner. Alderman O'Rourke failed to represent the community needs of the 4800 block of Winthrop; therefore, twice as many people sought a different civil servant to serve their needs. The fourteen JOIN members also came with something more than filled out petitions. They had over fifty letters written by neighborhood residents. Park Commissioner Thomas Berry gave them six minutes, and dissuaded them of the notion that he could act independently of City Hall. In other words, the Alderman, who had been evading their requests, was their only option. The article ended with a light-hearted threat, stating that if City Hall neglected their needs, then they would take their kids to play in the lobby of City Hall.

On September 22, 1965 David W. Joe wrote a sparse piece simply titled "Playground." In contrast to Perez's essay months earlier, this article did not convey a sense of democratic possibility. Nor did it have the militancy and the humour of the article in early August. Joe somberly recounted the hospitalization of three children, and the fact that two children had been hit by automobiles since JOIN members had last visited with the Assistant Park Commissioner in early August. Perez described JOIN members removing broken glass from the parking lot that they wished was a playground. The article chronicled the meetings with the Alderman, the Assistant Park Commissioner, and yet another possible ally, Assistant Park Commissioner James Nolan, who ranked higher in the hierarchy, as he was Assistant to the General Superintendent of

Parks. JOIN did not send delegates possessing 227 petitions and 50 letters—this time, they simply wrote to Nolan directly. Nolan responded in a similar vein as Alderman O'Rourke and Assistant Commissioner Thomas Berry. He would refer their case to the Recorded Estimates Division for investigation.

According to JOIN's press, Nolan gave them the "run around," which was no different from the lack of response that neighborhood residents had gotten before. The JOIN newsletter covered this initiative as it had progressed over the past three months. It answered a question that the JOIN newsletter had posed a few months before the residents of Winthrop took the ballot: Cars or Kids? The article began, "every once in a while, the city gets around to condemning some of the buildings in this area which aren't fit to live in."<sup>35</sup> The anonymous author claimed that the spaces that these condemned buildings occupied would best be served as playgrounds, or day-care centres for kids. The author concluded with an anecdote about a condemned building: "A man who was interested in parking lots came to look at the property." Implicitly, the question asked in the spring was answered in the autumn. The municipal government seemed to have chosen cars or private investment, rather than public expenditures in the slums.

Aldermen such as O'Rourke and the Park Commissioners probably had little to no influence in this matter. The historian Roger Biles argues that after Mayor Daley took office, aldermen in Chicago had increasingly less influence. During Daley's first term as mayor, the state legislature passed a law that transferred the preparation of the budget from the Council to the mayor. Daley used this to his advantage. Biles writes that preparing the budget gave "Daley

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<sup>35</sup> "Cars or Kids?" *JOIN Newsletter* (April 8, 1965), Box 20, Folder 2, SDS Papers.

knowledge of each dollar spent, and who profited from each transaction.”<sup>36</sup> There did not appear to be sufficient political incentive for Daley to invest in Uptown. Moreover, if slum removal interested Daley, and it did, then investing in the slum areas would not make sense, as he preferred these places to be replaced with higher income housing.

It would not, however, have been without historical precedence in the area if they had been successful in getting a playground. Chicago contained block clubs; groups of people from the neighbourhood who held meetings, and deliberated about the good of the community. In the mid-fifties, the block club of Winthrop 4600 took the time to clear a vacant lot that had attracted illegal dumping.<sup>37</sup> They raised over two-hundred and fifty dollars for playground equipment. The community members succeeded in transforming this empty space into a playground. According to the historian Devon Hunter, Albert Votaw, the head of the Uptown Chicago Commission (UCC), made sure to publicize this accomplishment, so that Votaw “could legitimately claim that the UCC was on its way to representing the economically and socially diverse.”<sup>38</sup>

With such success, in an area so nearby, the residents of 4800 Winthrop had realistic goals. Would not Alderman O’Rourke, or Mayor Daley, also want that same good publicity that Votaw exploited? The historical context makes the question—cars or kids—extremely important at this time of urban renewal. Hunter points out that the 1949 Illinois Blighted Area Development Act fundamentally deemed slum clearance as in the interest of the public good. Furthermore, the National Housing Act modelled itself after Illinois.<sup>39</sup> In Uptown, Chicago and

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<sup>36</sup> Roger Biles, *Richard J. Daley* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1995), 53.

<sup>37</sup> Devon Hunter, “Growing Diversity: Urban Renewal, Community Action, and the Politics of Cultural Diversity in Uptown Chicago 1940-1970,” (PhD Diss., Loyola University, 2015), 19.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

in other urban centres of the U.S., the government was confronted with choices between turning a condemned building into a playground, public housing (the act allotted only fifteen percent to public housing), or into a parking lot. In the case with Uptown, we see how the people did not really have a choice despite their best efforts.

JOIN also published objectives that they wanted to bring before the employees at the War on Poverty Office. They did not simply go into welfare offices, or before park commissioners, and improvise. Furthermore, requests needed committee approval. The committee approved specific requests for housing, such as the need for trained supervisors to identify harmful lead in buildings, to locate affordable rentals for large families, and to ensure that landlords made repairs when needed.<sup>40</sup> This was late September. On December 13, 1965 ten members of JOIN read a statement to the Legislative Advisory Committee on Public Aid. JOIN wanted 30 cents added to each welfare check; an additional 30 cents ensured that welfare recipients reached what the government defined as extreme poverty-- currently, welfare recipients did not even reach this standard. JOIN members researched what the government defined as poverty, discussed problems that they knew best, and proposed pragmatic solutions to those problems. If there really was a WAR on Poverty, this was how poor people and the student activists planned to fight the war.

JOIN wanted consultation, at least a part in decision making, at the Urban Progress Meetings, and on June 8, 1965 when only three out of twenty-two members were permitted to attend a meeting, JOIN members considered this illegal, as this violated Title 11 of the Economic

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<sup>40</sup> Sonya Alvin, "JOIN Visits War on Poverty Office," *JOIN Newsletter* (September 21, 1965), Box 21, Folder 2, SDS Papers.

Opportunity Act, which stipulated the maximum feasible participation of the poor. Dorothy Perez felt further angered by the fact that the Urban Progress Board was appointed, and not elected; appointees illegally prohibited JOIN members from attending meetings. Perez concluded that “every meeting attempted by that committee will be illegal and we will protest.”<sup>41</sup>

Underneath her article was Ron Nicolas's “Getting Together with the Police,” an essay that further explored legality. JOIN members visited the police department, to request the creation of a civilian review board that would mediate claims of police brutality. (Under Mayor Daley, even city council lost its power to review criminal investigations, so it is difficult to see how JOIN might gain an independent board of local citizens.) The police captain did not assure the JOIN members that police brutality would be brought to justice. He evaded the request by setting yet another meeting. These articles convey a police force that could and did act criminally, a poverty center that did not function as a poverty center, and a representative from City Hall who did not represent community problems. In these conditions, JOIN members interpreted the society in which they lived as neither lawful nor democratic. Seemingly small concessions, such as building a playground, could have corrected this perception.

The Edgewater Uptown News, a newspaper in Chicago, interpreted the people who picketed the Urban Progress Center exclusively as “the professional type of social drop-out.” The press claimed that it was these “social drop-outs,” rather than local residents, who picketed. The anonymous writer in JOIN countered that only one student activist “who lives in Uptown and works with JOIN” was among the picketers. The rest of the picketers were residents. The anonymous writer stated that “They [the student activists] have gladly dropped out of the middle

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<sup>41</sup> “Social Drop-out” *JOIN Newsletter* (June 18, 1965), Box 20, Folder 3, SDS Papers.

class in order to work with JOIN.” The language was framed in cooperative language. The student activists had to work 'with' the underclass, rather than impose their own will. The lone activist among the crowd “lives in Uptown,” confirming that he or she had some kind of knowledge of poverty that legitimated picketing a center designed for the poor. If this was a student who stayed on campus, such an action could not be justified. The way in which this article was articulated made ERAP sound efficacious-- it was the story of the organizer who was not domineering, who did not undermine the grassroots movement. An article a few weeks later, discussed “high school dropouts?” It stated: “Rich people are also bored with school.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, ERAPers determined that the campus was not the place for social activism. They had become social dropouts attempting to organize a constituency comprised mostly of high school dropouts, in the hopes that these dropouts might be a catalyst for change. In the process, they found people with more immediate concerns than revolution, but who were willing to articulate and to test their ideas of what a democratic society might look like for the economically disadvantaged. In Chapter 2, I will investigate the correspondence among the student activists, to get a picture of what they thought of JOIN.

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<sup>42</sup> *JOIN Newsletter* (July 15, 1965), Box 20, Folder 3, SDS Papers.

## Chapter two

### Revolution or Reform?

A debate that lasted a mere few hours determined whether hundreds of students would leave their campuses to organize unemployed people in urban and rural areas. In December 1963, at the National Council for SDS, in what became known as the Hayden-Haber debate, Al Haber and Tom Hayden argued about the direction of student activism. Haber argued that students should remain on campus, and use funds obtained through unions, for the purpose of raising awareness of class on campus. He argued that students lacked the resources to develop a sustainable project in urban areas. Moreover, even if students could raise sufficient funding, they still lacked a theory and a clear articulation of what they would be doing in the ghetto. Bearing these limitations in mind, Haber believed that there would be more to gain on-campus where the potential existed for revolution. By contrast, Tom Hayden found that the campuses were full of “academic bullshit,” and that legitimate grass-roots activism must take place beyond the confines of the academy. Undeterred by Haber’s objections, Hayden urged the other student delegates at the National Council to take the risk in the hopes that “day to day reforms,” rather than campus reforms, “might lead to revolution.”<sup>43</sup> The NC voted twenty to six in favor of Hayden’s proposal.

This chapter will analyze the arguments that ERAPers had while they were participating in ERAP. In one respect, it will show how Haber’s analyses that ERAP lacked theory was partially correct. But it will also show how the students who belonged to ERAP attempted to give more intellectual content to their activism. In 1970, Todd Gitlin wrote of the motivating

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<sup>43</sup> Jennifer Frost, *An Interracial Movement of the Poor* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 17.

force that drove students to engage with ERAP: “We found ourselves incomplete as long as we took refuge in playground universities.”<sup>44</sup> Students involved took different tactics. For example, Gitlin did not go to door-to-door in the typical manner of most organizers in ERAP. Rather, he conducted interviews with unemployed or marginally employed people, which he subsequently published. Gitlin maintained that this literary approach defined his role somewhat differently, so that at certain times he acted as a good mediator between student activists and the residents of Uptown when they had disagreements.<sup>45</sup> But even if acting as occasional mediator, and even if trying to represent Uptown residents through oral interviews, Gitlin still claimed to have no expertise about the kinds of people who lived in Uptown. He knew that they were typically Southern migrants; he knew that “the militant unions which had once fought for the miners had succumbed to the calculation of capital,” which resulted in “the casting-off of most miners in the return for the benefit of the few.”<sup>46</sup> To Gitlin, this process, along with segregation in the United States, explained why poor white Southerners existed in a high concentration in Chicago’s Uptown area. But the kind of racial perspectives of people such as Ras Bryant, the 62 year-old from West Virginia, would be hard to fathom. Gitlin travelled to West Virginia with Bryant, and he heard how Bryant spoke about African Americans: “They should give em their own state, let em live by theysself, and give the whites the rest of the states.”<sup>47</sup> Gitlin observed that in Chicago Bryant censored himself. Bryant’s social intelligence told him that he should not use such language around the student activists. Gitlin found Bryant acted differently according to context-- in his hometown, he was racist; in Uptown, around student activists, he repressed his

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<sup>44</sup> Gitlin, xxii.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, xxi.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.,138.

racism. This contradiction was an example of how Gitlin and the other activists could never really know their subject, which was problematic because they theorized that a movement could be formed by uniting poor whites and poor blacks.

The student activist Richard Rothstein also found some promising aspects of the people they tried to organize, as well as some disheartening aspects. Rothstein wrote of the poor, “Yet each has his own ideological hang-ups (by my standards).”<sup>48</sup> Rothstein discovered paradoxes. For example, he met a woman who was both segregationist and integrationist. Because African Americans assaulted her son at high school, she staunchly opposed the integration of schools. As Rothstein quoted her in his article “JOIN Organizes the Poor, “All coloured kids are bad and ought to be separated from whites.”<sup>49</sup> But that categorical statement only applied to “coloured kids.” She perceived African American adults differently because she shared the same workspace with African American adults: they were her colleagues. Rothstein sought to dissolve the paradox, to make her see that “good Negro adults were once Negro kids.” For the sake of the movement, he needed her to make this necessary connection. He wanted her to view the world as an activist, and not as a parent whose child had been harmed.

The idea of communism proved just as contentious as integration. Rothstein encountered unemployed men who became paranoid over ideas such as communism and socialism. These men, however, did not idealize big business either. One such anti-communist declared that the nation needs “the people to take over the industries of the nation.”<sup>50</sup> This transformation would balance the unjust nature of big business. In theory he wanted a socialist nation. But because the

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<sup>48</sup>Richard Rothstein, “JOIN Organizes the Poor,” *ERAP Newsletter* (November 9, 1964), Box 19, Folder 2, SDS Papers.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

United States was in a Cold War with the Soviet Union, and the implication of this war was that citizens were conditioned to be paranoid over any strain of socialism, the man was conditioned to be adverse to a movement that he actually wanted.

ERAPers themselves had just as many “hang-ups” as the unemployed people whom they tried to organize. For example, in an ERAP newsletter published in the autumn after the first summer projects, we can see pragmatic questions about what role students would have in organizing. When summer ended, or when students had exams for which they had to study, they would simply leave the ERAP project. This risked any kind of relationship that the students might have formed with the unemployed, as it would appear that “the organization has sold them out.”<sup>51</sup> Individuals already demoralized might become even more demoralized if they saw that students did not have much commitment. To minimize this effect, the ERAP newsletter suggested that students not interested in long-term organizing should be used to conduct surveys and to research the local power structures of the city in which they happened to be organizing. These were less personal tasks compared to accompanying an unemployed person to the welfare office.

The ideological divergences of the students centred on the actual extent of radicalization among the poor. Rothstein thought that he had found a radical perspective among many of the people with whom he worked. The residents were not so much interested in day to day grievances, but were “deeply articulate about social alienation and political powerlessness.”<sup>52</sup> Others, such as Carl Wittman, dissented. Wittman argued that ERAP did not need to radicalize the poor in order to enact change. If particular poor people, who did not appear radical,

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<sup>51</sup> ERAP Newsletter (October 1964), Box 19, Folder 3, SDS Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

nevertheless had the desire to address specific issues, such as recreation in their area or police brutality, then assisting them was by no means antithetical to ERAP's goals. Wittman said, "These issues are tangible manifestations of people's alienation."<sup>53</sup> For Wittman, radicalism and fulfilling more trivial tasks were compatible, whereas Rothstein hoped to catalyze an untapped well of radicalism. As of the fall after the first summer projects in 1964, ERAPers did not have a blueprint to follow.

Along with the uncertainty of the poor's revolutionary potential, the student activists felt uncertain about how to categorize themselves according to different age groups, as some of the students happened to be older than other students. Paul Potter asked whether there ought to be a distinction between adult organizers over the age of twenty-five, and younger less experienced students. Potter thought that the distinction mattered because some of the older people might not identify with the younger people. However, Rothstein countered that many of the students wanted to escape paternalism, and that creating distinctions among adult organizers would prevent ERAP from growing into a natural composite that included "community people, professors, students and anyone else committed a movement for a democratic society."<sup>54</sup> On the one hand, Rothstein felt skeptical about the compatibility between radicalism and focusing on day to day grievances. On the other hand Rothstein saw no need to distinguish between older and younger students. A need arose to make a distinction between radicalism and the day to day, but no need to distinguish between age groups. These examples of disagreement became published in the ERAP newsletter, as a way to illustrate the non-hierarchical, even if unresolved, nature of ERAP.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

ERAPers also wrote and responded to different proposals for what service art could provide for their movement. Carl Oglesby sent a seven page essay directly addressed to ERAP director Rennie Davis and ERAP activist Richard Manella about the possibility of art to dramatize ERAP. In Oglesby's analysis, theatre "closely resembles" social organizing because it transformed individuals into one audience with a shared perception of the show. Similarly, ERAPers sought to organize the unemployed, turning many individuals with a different race, gender, and religious background, into one class. If done effectively, theatre "gives direction to what was random."<sup>55</sup> Oglesby pointed out that the theatrical depiction of a shared class consciousness, moving in a purposeful direction, would be "something like what ERAP projects want to do."

But Oglesby also pointed out problems with this ideal. First, a theatre project would be interpreted as a fiction, which could be dismissed by the audience of any potential drama as less serious. Second, nothing guaranteed that the fiction would be good. A proposed drama project risked scarce resources without any guarantee of good acting or good writing.<sup>56</sup> Oglesby acknowledged the intrinsic appeal of dramatizing ERAP projects, but concluded that theatre did not offer a practical, problem-based solution to the goals of ERAP worth investing in.

As an alternative, Oglesby suggested an anthology of written works, which eliminated contingencies such as bad acting. Furthermore, instead of being limited to the local level, an anthology could reach a broader audience.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, in the United States many prominent writers actively practiced their craft. Oglesby's non-sectarian list included names ranging from

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<sup>55</sup> Carl Oglesby, "Notes on the Theater Idea," in ERAP Correspondence (February 12, 1965), Box 21, Folder 2, SDS Papers.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

J.D. Salinger to Jack Kerouac to Vladimir Nabokov. Oglesby claimed, “We have to be grandiose just to be microscopic.”<sup>58</sup> ERAP certainly represented a rich subject matter for these writers to pursue. There existed an underclass with no voice. If some of the brightest students left their campuses to organize in the ghetto, how implausible was it that some of the most prominent writers might write 5000 words as part of an anthology? Oglesby suggested that ERAPers could suggest themes for these iconic writers. “Kerouac, come take a look at the old underworld of the unhip poor.”

ERAPers never did seek out one of the great Beat generation novelists, but they did contact puppeteer Peter Schumann of the Bread and Puppet Theater, who operated out of New York, and who had experience producing radical plays there. Although Schumann agreed on radical theatre’s appropriateness to the urban slums, he informed ERAP that he was not “the right person to answer your questions...”<sup>59</sup> He responded that he could not work for ERAP because he himself was poor. He had six children at home, and the puppet shows in New York barely sufficed to provide for his family. He could not afford to experiment with ERAP even if the group aligned with the aesthetic of what good art ought to be about. This illustrated the constraints that ERAP faced: from one side, ERAP risked spending too much on performers, and on the other, performers risked a pay cut if they even wanted to work for ERAP. Schumann nevertheless took some time to share his insights about radical plays. For example, he advised ERAP that they should not to be too overt, too preachy. Radical plays that tried to persuade invariably did not persuade, whereas the improvised plays, the ones that did not have an overt revolutionary message, tended to have more of an implicit revolutionary content. Because

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Schumann to Carl Oglesby in ERAP Correspondence (March 1, 1965), Box 21, Folder 2, SDS Papers.

ERAPers such as Rothstein and Witman debated what was revolutionary, this advice may have struck a chord more towards reform than revolution.

ERAP did not attract any of America's literary elites to take up their cause, nor could the organization persuade a more modest artist such as Schumann because the students lacked the funding to pay him. In theory, Oglesby's analysis was probably correct that ERAP would have needed a major literary figure to have gained even a minor impact in American society. In reality, ERAP received a letter from a street performer declining their offer.

ERAP activists may have lacked a clear sense of what role art could play in the movement, but they did have an idea about what kinds of books people in the movement should be reading. They published bibliographic material. ERAP recommended forty-seven books about community organizing. Another section of the bibliography contained an annotated section of books that analyzed the American economy. The brief introduction to this bibliography stated that the bibliography was "neither scholarly nor academic."<sup>60</sup> Rather, the list, according to the compiler, Lee Webb, relegated research to its "proper role," which was to provide "answers for people who are involved in action upon their community." Some of the literature that Webb included contradicted other recommended works. For example, Webb summarized President Kennedy's Yale Commencement Speech as stating that "all economic conflicts have disappeared." In contrast, Daniel Friedenbergs "A Fabian Program for America" made a very different argument according to Webb: "Chronicles the failure of the American economy...unmet needs, unemployment, poor income distribution. Argues his economic program for change."<sup>61</sup> An asterisk beside the bibliographical entry indicated that the work could be obtained through

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<sup>60</sup> Lee Webb, *ERAP Bibliography*. Box 21, Folder 4, SDS Papers.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

the SDS office. The literature may be viewed as not necessarily balanced; however, the fact that Webb did include Kennedy, and the economists who identified with Kennedy's liberal policies, indicated an attempt at impartial weighing of the evidence. To be sure, the bibliography was designed to 'answer' questions, and certainly the majority of the literature represented the answers to which Webb wanted his readers to arrive at, but the inclusion of the counter-literature would enable the activists to engage with other points of view.

Besides secondary works about organizing and about economic theory, there was an incomplete bibliography of government publications and proceedings. As ERAP premised itself on the notion that the government initiative to end poverty lacked substance, this bibliography aimed to cover the people in the government who were at least consistent towards combating poverty. The government publications were largely about conversion, about the transition between a war economy and a peace-time economy. Included was a hearing about "the economic impact of defence cutbacks and phase-outs in New Jersey." Another broader study on the same theme was the six-month long "Senate Subcommittee on Manpower and Employment" headed by Senator Joseph Clark. The annotations of these proceedings concluded that defence contractors required a high degree of specialization, and that shifting to commercial markets would require diversification. The reports stated that a company's ability to make this transition while retaining its current level of employment was unlikely.<sup>62</sup> Of course, these findings had implications for ERAP since the student activists depended on a high level of unemployment to mobilize a movement. Government hearings about moving from a war economy to a peace economy were certainly of note.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

ERAP activists had other ways of obtaining information aside from scholarly work and government records. For example, one student wrote her father, who was an attorney, a letter inquiring about Ohio's Unemployment Act. She received a formal letter back from the law office of Power, Griffith, Jones & Bell. Her father, acting as her lawyer, providing some legal counsel on relevant sections of the Ohio Unemployment Act. He cautioned her that “the unemployment Compensation Act in each state is a very complicated statute.”<sup>63</sup> Because ERAP based its projects in five different states, and because ERAP concerned itself with the unemployed, this represented a problem. What was applicable in Cleveland, Ohio, was not necessarily the case in Chicago, Illinois, and understanding the differences presupposed legal knowledge. The activist's father knew what interested his daughter the most: the “processing of claims and delay that might occur in payment of claims.”<sup>64</sup> He wrote that these particular procedures were regulated both federally and on the state level. However, after identifying an unwelcome fact, he tried to assure his daughter that as far as the Ohio Act went, an Advisory Council existed as a provision, to ensure that the processing of claims worked efficiently. Moreover, large unions employed lawyers to review the administration of the unemployment act.

Because ERAP disparaged the War on Poverty as consisting of government sponsored advice centers, and because ERAP did not highly value unions because many non-union members became vulnerable to poverty, probably this activist's father did not provide her with much assurance. An Advisory Council was like an advice center, and unions provided some assurance, but the language that her father used portrayed unions as a kind of guarantor that the unemployed would be provided for in case of an emergency. Her father represented the kind of

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<sup>63</sup>John Bell, *Letter to his daughter* (undated and name of daughter unknown), Box 21, Folder 4, SDS Papers.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

organization man whom the students involved in ERAP deplored, yet he must have had some authority as he was her father. The fact that she wrote him for advice suggests as much, but the fact that she was part of ERAP, if she identified with the main thrust of ERAP's analysis, might have pushed her in a different direction.

In a different ERAP essay, "The American Underclass," Al Haber wrote that the different language and dialect of the poor created obstacles. Failing to conform to middle-class models of behaviour ensured that the poor would remain immobile because the middle class acted as gatekeepers, and the appearance of difference, even if not related to work ethic, decreased the chances of mobility. Haber argued that the attitudes of the middle-class, not the economy, and not the poor themselves, contributed to sustaining poverty. Becoming poor left the poor person to "the 'damnation' of a secular society." The poor person's character was mythologized as everything negative, which stood in contrast to the "reputable poor," the working-class. Because poverty was associated with individual failure, protesting the reasons for poverty would not make sense, nor would collective action represent a sound tactic, as organizing with other poor people implied "acceptance of the moral stigma" that came with poverty.

Certainly people such as John Dawson and Etta Dawson, whom I discussed in Chapter 1, must have keenly felt such stigma. Etta Dawson recalled that after giving birth the doctor said, "You better not have no more. Better get you some birth control."<sup>65</sup> Upon his arrival in Chicago, John Dawson noted that his clothing drew scrutiny: "I just don't see that because a man's not got a suit of clothes, that he's not as good as that next man."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>66</sup> Gitlin refers to a documentary in his book *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago*.

Dawson may have held that conviction, but at different times he thought that the color of a man's skin implied superiority. Gitlin included in his book about how Dawson got drunk and "began to denounce Martin Luther King at a meeting for making money off the poor niggers, and when Little Dovie asked him to desist, he burst outside and tore up his JOIN card."<sup>67</sup> Dawson would change, however, and found himself in the summer of 1969, after JOIN no longer existed, at an "SCLC meeting in Atlanta, when he was recognized from the film by a racist white man. A while later--information is scanty as the book goes to press-- he was murdered."<sup>68</sup>

John Dawson was from the South; he moved to Chicago where he became involved with JOIN, which ultimately had the intention of organizing poor whites and poor blacks. He went back to the South, and became involved with an African American civil rights group, and he was probably killed for associating with this group. Certainly the students listening in on the Haber-Hayden debate in December 1963 would not have foreseen such an individual outcome. They proved that it was possible to convert one lower-class white, but he died for the conversion. The circulation of bibliography, the discourse about what role art should play, the newsletters debating the revolutionary potential of the poor, indicated that JOIN tried to gain an intellectual bearing, but ultimately, whatever theories they could devise could not match the reality of the people they tried to organize.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 216.

### Chapter three

#### The Rural Dimension of ERAP

Berman Gibson's son, a star high school basketball player in Hazard, Kentucky, developed the habit of placing an axe on the passenger seat of his car.<sup>69</sup> This weapon served as a precaution, as his father functioned as the leader of wildcat strikes throughout southeastern Kentucky. These roving pickets extended beyond the mines. Miners visited the homes of operators and detonated dynamite. Mr. and Mrs. Walters, small non-union coal operators, were spared shards of glass flying into their bedroom by the mere fact that their Venetian blind was drawn, and thus blocked the broken glass caused by the explosion.<sup>70</sup> Both sides resorted to violence, thus the axe wielding teenage boy of Berman Gibson fit the context of Hazard, Kentucky in the early 1960s.

The presence of 175 students in Hazard over the last weekend of March 1964, however, represented an anomaly to the coal mining town.<sup>71</sup> The average citizen had not completed high school, yet this rural mountain town hosted a conference wherein students and miners discussed the possibility of a movement. In 1963, Berman Gibson, the leader of the newly formed Appalachian Committee for Full Employment, alongside Hamish Sinclair of the Committee for Miners, a group established in New York City for the purpose of raising money for miners' legal funds, toured college campuses to promote their wildcat strike. Elite universities, such as Cornell, sent food and clothing-- the students called the drive Bring Christmas to Kentucky. And what started as gestures of support from a distance turned into a conference for which students

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<sup>69</sup> Dan Wakefield, "In Hazard," in *Commentary Magazine* 208, no. 9 (September 1, 1963).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Hazard Herald* (April 2, 1964), Box 21, Folder 10 SDS Papers.

had to fill out application forms to attend, to see if they qualified as suitable delegates from their universities.

From the previous chapters, we saw Ras Byrant, who came from West Virginia to Chicago, and John Dawson, who came from Georgia to Chicago. Lower income people from the South migrated to cities, where in eight northern cities ERAP established offices in an attempt to help the lower class migrants. The ERAP project in Hazard, Kentucky differed from the ERAP projects in the city. In Hazard, the students visited the miners who did not migrate, who chose to remain in their rural areas. Thus to gain a more comprehensive picture of the scope of ERAP, this chapter will focus on Hazard, Kentucky. First, I will provide a description of the miners in Hazard. The situation really was confusing in the sense of knowing whether or not the strikes were wildcat strikes, unauthorized by the union, or whether they did have union support. In oral interviews twenty-five years later, some of the miners said that it was authorized, but only under the radar, so that the United Mine Workers could deny legal liability if the miners destroyed mine property. This may have been the case, but most likely the students perceived the strike as a wildcat strike, and thus, as another instance of a labor organization that did not show much vitality.

Hazard differed from the city projects in the sense that the cities did not contain a group of unemployed people ready to organize, whereas Hazard did in fact have unemployed people taking action. Moreover, in Berman Gibson, the unemployed men had a leader, and unlike the cities, this leader actively sought student assistance. The main issue over which the miners went on strike needs to be understood in a historical context, and therefore I will go back to 1948 to explain this context.

John L. Lewis, as the president of the UMWA, forged an unprecedented deal in 1948 with coal operators. For every ton of coal mined, the operators would pay five cents into a newly formed pension and medical care fund. Miners paid directly for medical prior to 1948 through the traditional check-off system. Every paycheck their employers would deduct medical. Work related injuries incurred in the mines posed no liability for the operators, and thus in the late 1940s many union members felt discontent with their working conditions. Lewis negotiated a new contract that created a pension and medical care fund that no other union in the United States had at the time. By 1950, operators agreed to pay 40 cents a ton into the medical and pension fund.<sup>72</sup>

How did Lewis get the operators to pay so much royalty? Workers in other industries, such as oil, did not enjoy such high support. The answer is compromise. In 1950, Lewis agreed in the Bituminous Coal contract never to interfere with mechanization. The companies would pay steep royalties for medical and pension; in return, Lewis pledged that the union would not strike when the coal companies introduced new machinery that would replace workers. The philosophy consisted in the idea that coal mining in the future was to be done by fewer, but more highly paid workers.<sup>73</sup>

In the early fifties, however, the low demand for coal prompted many of the large to middle-size coal companies, such as the Columbus Mining Company, to shut down. Bruce Stevens, a former attorney and executive of Kentucky River Coal, recounted in 1987 of

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<sup>72</sup> George Goldstein, "The Rise and Decline of the UMWA Health and Retirement Funds Program, 1946-1995," in *The United Mine Workers of America: a Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 239-250.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

middle-sized mines: “They elected to quit. They didn’t go broke.”<sup>74</sup> The companies foresaw the market for coal diminishing. When they shut down operations, the company stores that had been established to accommodate the miners also vanished. According to Stevens, this set the stage for someone like Gibson to lead a movement, as whole towns disappeared when a coal company relocated or shut down. At first, however, in the mid-1950s, many small operators, usually run by former miners, re-opened nonunion mines after the big mines had left. Un beholden to a union contract, the small operators offered their workers no elaborate medical coverage, and no fixed wage. And the small union mines that remained, out of necessity, signed “sweetheart agreements.” The operators paid their workers less than the negotiated \$22.50 dollar a day wage, and the union did not do anything so long as these small operators paid 40 cents a ton royalty. In a 1987 oral interview, Buster Horne said that some union mines would pay as low as ten dollars a day.<sup>75</sup>

In 1956, the UMW, despite the lower costs of coal, and an increasing absence of union mines, nevertheless generated sufficient funds to build four hospitals in southeastern Kentucky, one of which was located in Hazard.<sup>76</sup> For eligibility, workers had to have worked within the last year. Under these conditions, workers could visit the hospital, and the various clinics established across the country. Expenses such as maternity costs, if a miner’s wife gave birth, were included in the royalty funds, and not deducted from paychecks. George S. Goldstein argues that the

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<sup>74</sup> Bruce Stevens. Interview by Doug Cantrell. Tape recording. July 18, 1987. Appalachia: Roving Pickets Oral History Project. Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries. Collection cited hereafter as Appalachia: Roving Pickets Oral History Project.

<sup>75</sup> Buster Horne, Interview by Doug Cantrell. Tape recording. July 24, 1987. Appalachia: Roving Pickets Oral History Project.

<sup>76</sup> George Goldstein, “The Rise and Decline of the UMWA Health and Retirement Funds Program, 1946-1995,” in *The United Mine Workers of America: a Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 239-250.

clinics provided higher quality care than for-profit insurance based clinics because the doctor was not paid by the number of patients that he or she treated. In other words, not being paid by the patient allowed the doctor to spend more time on individual cases.

In 1961, thousands of miners received a letter from UMW's Josephine Roche, who acted as one of the three trustees of the welfare and medical care fund. She informed the miners that their medical cards were invalid because the operators failed to pay the royalty funds. In 1962, she sent another letter stating that the UMW could not afford to run the four hospitals in southeastern Kentucky, and therefore, the union would either have to sell or close the hospitals.<sup>77</sup>

Deprived of their medical funds, the miners took action. Under these conditions, Berman Gibson assumed the role of leader. In 1962, Gibson, along with nine other men, was charged with trying to blow up a railway bridge. The federal government indicted three men; Gibson, along with three other men, did not face charges. Bruce Stephens deemed this a sound strategy: "Had they been successful in dynamiting that bridge, they would have cut us off entirely."

The company that Stevens represented, Kentucky River Coal, owned 70 out of 80 truck mines in southeastern Kentucky. A truck mine was not located near the railroad, so coal needed to be transported by a truck to the railroad. These mines ranged from two to twenty miles from the nearest railroad, which of course added to the cost of production, as the coal had to be transferred.<sup>78</sup> As an attorney, Stevens oversaw the leases that his company extended to operators both small and large. Unsuccessful in blowing up the bridge, which would have cut supply of all the mines off, Gibson and his men-- the roving pickets-- burned or set fire to 11 tipples that Kentucky River coal either leased or owned. The miners countered that the operators burned

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<sup>77</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, *Forty cents a Ton*, directed by Hamish Sinclair (New York, 1963), documentary.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

their own tipples to claim insurance. Insurance companies never discovered any foul play, and the miners never faced charges for dynamiting or setting fire to tipples.

When the roving pickets engaged in more visible protests, such as standing outside of nonunion mines (the press deemed them the roving pickets because they would wander southeastern Kentucky looking to convert nonunion miners), the operators and picketers would sometimes engage in shootouts. Stevens recounted how mine operator Virginia Collins held her own in a gunfight with the roving pickets. The UMW disassociated from the violence, but when asked if the union had anything to do with the behavior of the miners, Stevens voiced scepticism. He attributed the denial to politics, and pointed out how in the past the UMW had lost a multi-million dollar court case against Bluegrass Mines. The company proved in a court of law that the union endorsed violence, despite publicly opposing it. Buster Horne also corroborated this view that the union silently endorsed the violence. Hobert Maggard, a former roving picket, said, “The union was the roving pickets. Those were all union men.”<sup>79</sup> The history is complicated because explicitly claiming union endorsement may still have legal implications for the UAW.

In regards to people coming into Hazard because of the roving pickets, Stevens said, “These people come in here from New York and all other places. And they popped up with all kinds of committees... We had the pamphleteers come here, writing all sorts of inflammatory materials.” Indeed, students from ERAP prepared working papers. Todd Gitlin raised over a hundred dollars in funds for publishing material. The students drafted a prospectus for the conference that outlined their plans for the Easter conference.

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<sup>79</sup> Hobert Maggard. Interview by Doug Cantrell. Tape recording. July 26, 1987. Appalachia: Roving Pickets Oral History Project.

ERAP, SDS, and SNCC co-sponsored this event, which aimed to develop a summer program that would depend on the local efforts of the miners. In other words, the students viewed their purpose in Kentucky as facilitators of a new movement. They did not want to hijack the miners' movement. If things went to plan, a bi-weekly newspaper would give voice to the roving picket movement. For the youth, a new center would be built. In the March 1963 documentary *40 cents a ton* (produced by the Committee for Miners) Berman Gibson said of Hazard, "We got a bowling alley and that's the limit." The youth in Hazard merely walked around all day; the prospectus proposed a center for youth to correct this situation. The prospectus called for dramatizing the impotence of the War on Poverty. In Chapter 2, we saw how ERAP tried to seek out a puppeteer to perform, to dramatize the plight of the poor in Chicago; this proposal bears a similar social content. Lastly, student activists concluded that grievances ought to be compiled, as a means to bolster the miners' cause.

The students coming into Hazard came from a wide range of universities. The application form consisted of questions about experience organizing inside and outside of school. The application form asked the applicants' age and what school the student would represent, to ensure that a variety of schools had delegates in Hazard. Pat Dallas, aged 18, came from Blackburn College in Illinois. Under experience, he wrote, "Participation in demonstration against barber in Yellow Springs who refused to cut Negroes' hair."<sup>80</sup> He heard about the economic poverty of people in the Kentucky from his mother, so he decided to apply for the conference. Eighteen year-old Retta Baron from Sarah Lawrence College described her motive as follows: "It is necessary to see and experience that way of life yourself." Many of the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

applicants had experience with the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). To decipher the potential commitment and expertise of students, the application also asked questions about whether the participant was interested in part-time or full-time participation, seasonal or for the entire year. It asked whether research or field work interested the student.

The working papers also included instructions to accepted students. Their lodgings, with the miners' families, typically did not have indoor plumbing. They did not have extra beds, so they would need sleeping bags. No matter how uncomfortable the circumstances were, the students should not take up at the local motel, as a prominent banker owned it, and if the miners saw students supporting his business, they would distrust the students. In terms of attitude, the letter, addressed from both SDS leader Paul Booth and Committee for Miners director Hamish Sinclair, stated two very explicit claims about what the students were not to do. First, they were not to liberalize the miners. Many of the miners held perceptions about race that reflected the region. If the students desired to make any impact, they would have to reserve this pivotal issue for some time in the future, as the miners' predicament ostensibly was not about race. Second, under no circumstances should the students undermine the miners' traditional religious beliefs by talking about either "evolution in biology or revolution in morality." Major changes in society that the students underwent did not lend themselves to the miners' struggle with labor relations. The birth-control pill, the "Death of God," the Civil Rights Movement, the new ways of thinking on campuses were irrelevant next to what the miners wanted: hospitals and a strong union to support them. In case of emergency, the paper listed a telephone number to call, and gave the assurance that someone would be there shortly if they got into trouble.

Once at the conference, the students discussed papers, such as Mark Zweig's "Eastern Kentucky in Perspective":

Urban centers in the United States are having a difficult time absorbing unemployment in their own city. The fact that 36 months of continuous expansion has not reduced unemployment below 5.8% is strong evidence that there is no room for an influx of unemployed miners. In fact, after a record peace-time boom, there are millions of unemployed city dwellers who share the misery and hopelessness of the rural unemployed, suggesting that even strong general economic expansion can no longer be depended upon to employ the full potential in the United States.<sup>81</sup>

This theme presented itself in more than one paper. For example, Ray Miller wrote: "Migration is both an escape valve and a further depressant, because more and more of the migrants are bouncing back." But what was the solution? The students clearly identified a problem, but lacked a substantial alternative. The local newspaper, *The Hazard Herald*, whose editor Louise Hatmaker derided the roving pickets as communists, also disparaged the students in the April 2, 1964 edition of *The Hazard Herald*. She accused the students of uncritically following their peers. She took their "beatnik dress" as evidence that they did not respect the community that they sought to mobilize. Moreover, only 3 out of 175 students showed up at the newspaper to get another perspective. This was an unfair attack. If the students wanted the paper's point of view, then reading the paper ought to have been sufficient. It should not have been necessary to visit the journalists in their offices. Furthermore, Stanley Aronowitz and Hamish Sinclair, who had produced the documentary *Forty cents a ton*, included Hatmaker,

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

along with two other mine operators, in their documentary, to give the opposing side its voice. Sinclair and Aronowitz belonged to the Committee for Miners, a committee closely involved with the students. Presumably, the students would have had access to Hatmaker's perspective through that documentary. They would have heard her opinion that the consumer of coal, who had to pay more for coal because of the forty cents a ton royalty, should not have to pay for coal miners' medical care. They would have heard her opinion that tourism in Kentucky would revitalize the economy. Aside from the probability that students already had access to her perspective, the political situation must not be dismissed. If the students were informed that they could not stay at the local motel because the owner was a banker, then certainly being seen with the journalist, who derided the roving pickets as communists, would also have been politically unwise.

Hatmaker's prediction, however, that most students would not return to Hazard, that they would be gone after the weekend, turned out to be correct. Out of an expected 70 to 80 students over the summer only 5 showed up. But they did not act as passive followers. Kay Muller, for instance, actively helped miners secure medical and welfare payments that they thought had been revoked; seventeen year-old Charles Koeler built an outhouse for his host family. The biggest challenge consisted in George Goss sending a letter to the governor with the signatures of thirty-five men. The federal government, in some consistency with the War on Poverty, provided work for unemployed fathers, nicknamed the "Happy Pappy Program." The work usually included weeding, working on highways, and cleaning cemeteries. George Goss noticed that the men did not have their transportation to the worksite paid for, nor did they receive lunch with the work. These expenses were allegedly included in the program. But George Goss took a survey

and found out that employers violated the contract, so he composed a letter signed with 35 signatures. A week later, Goss, along with the men who signed the petition had to appear before a county judge, the High Sheriff, and an administrator from Kentucky's capital city, Frankfort. Goss received a warning, and the men were badly shaken up by what had occurred. *The Hazard Herald* also publicly denounced Goss as an unwanted outsider.

The local power structure in Hazard made the goals of the students and the miners difficult to achieve. In the late fifties, Hazard had a county judge, Judge Courtney Wells, who ruled impartially, and whom former roving pickets considered pro-labor. But in the early sixties, he lost his seat by a single vote. Berman Gibson himself ran for High Sheriff in 1965, but he also lost. The Citizens Committee for Law and Order put a lot of money into the opponents of Judge Wells and Berman Gibson, and with good reason. We saw the High Sheriff and county judge severely reprimand George Goss for showing an activist strain. How might that have played out if the High Sheriff had been Berman Gibson?

With the law and the press against the roving pickets and the student activists, the movement stood little chance. In 1987, former roving picketer Buster Horne was asked about whether he remembered if students came to Hazard. He replied, "Not much, some of them. Came from everywhere I guess. Don't know what brought them here."<sup>82</sup> The Port Huron Statement, the Hayden-Haber debate, the momentum from the Civil Rights Movement, and The War on Poverty all played a role in creating the historical conditions that brought 175 students to Hazard for a weekend, and contributed to less than a half a dozen remaining for nearly a year.

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<sup>82</sup> Buster Horne, Interview by Doug Cantrell. Tape recording. July 24, 1987. Appalachia: Roving Pickets Oral History Project.

Stevens referred to the roving pickets as the last gasp of labor, at least in terms of coal mining in Appalachia. ERAP represented more of a first attempt rather than a last gasp, at a time when society had never been so affluent, when students of most classes had access to higher education, and a moment of such optimism that students thought that they could truly restructure the economics of society. Despite the differing angles, there is still a lot of overlap in what both groups thought people should receive: basic medical, a chance for higher education, and a decent living.

## Conclusion

The bulk of the historiography on student activism in the 1960s focuses on the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s, and the anti-war protests in the late 1960s. This leaves the impression that the New Left was not interested in class. The journalist, E.J. Dionne, for example, has written about the New Left's attitude towards the poor as follows: "Even at its most democratic, at the time of the Port Huron Statement, the New Left displayed a certain contempt for the rest of America."<sup>83</sup>

The historical record does not support Dionne's claim. Through the ERAP projects, students attempted to make sure that welfare mothers received proper payments; they inspected buildings where landlords failed to make repairs; they provided a legal service at Tuesday night meetings; they circulated a petition for a playground; and, among other activities, they provided a frequent newsletter, a press for the poor, where the neighbourhood residents could write about their grievances, and have their voices heard by other poor people. The students may have had an uncertain awe of the poor, a certain naivety about what the unemployed could accomplish, but they did not have contempt.

I maintain that the student activists shared a lot of their theory of justice with the philosopher John Rawls. In 1971, Rawls published *A Theory of Justice*. According to Rawls, justice must base itself on fairness, and to achieve a theoretical approximation of the just society, Rawls introduced the idea of the veil of ignorance. He asked his readers to imagine that they did not know what position in society they occupied. A billionaire and a homeless person, for

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<sup>83</sup> E.J. Dionne, Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (Simon and Schuster, 1991), 49.

example, would not know their economic status when they bargained behind the veil of ignorance; a bar owner and a person who had fetal alcohol syndrome would not know their respective abilities and disabilities. Rawls maintained that rational agents concerned with a fair society would reduce risk by maximizing the minimum. For instance, the billionaire, not knowing whether he or she is a billionaire, would want a high minimum wage and an established welfare system. The able minded, unaware that they were able minded, might consent to prohibit substances that caused permanent disability out of an objective sense of fairness.

This ideal of fairness belongs to Enlightenment thought and its conceptions of progress, human rationality, and human nature. Rawls' philosophy marked more or less the last major theoretical defence of the welfare state. Ronald Reagan in the 1980s cut government spending for the lower classes, while giving enormous tax cuts to the wealthiest people in America. In the 1990s, Bill Clinton, although a Democrat, replaced Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which had been established under Roosevelt's New Deal Coalition, with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).<sup>84</sup> Clinton said that he aimed to end welfare as we know it, to get people dependent on welfare to take responsibility. The change included an annual decrease of a billion dollars for welfare. Over a million people lost their welfare eligibility. Between 1996 and 2000, people receiving welfare diminished from 12 million to 6 million.<sup>85</sup>

As the political sphere shifted to the right economically in the 1980s, scholars adopted an increasingly postmodern perspective. Enlightenment ideals such as fairness, truth, rationality, progress, and objectivity became less meaningful, if not meaningless. Other concepts, such as subjectivity, oppression, difference, patriarchy, and narrative became common terms in a

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<sup>84</sup> Biles, 308.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

post-truth, postmodern academic culture. The trend in academe tended more towards anti-enlightenment thinkers rather than enlightenment thinkers. People who drink and consume alcohol in this environment, for example, would not debate prohibition for the sake of fairness based on a Rawlsian model. Nor are they likely to engage in debates about the fair distribution of welfare.

Why? In 1995, a year before the Clinton administration reformed welfare, Todd Gitlin observed that he inhabited an academic culture in which “all relations are power relations.” If this was true, then basing arguments on Enlightenment principles of rationality, human nature, and progress become hopeless rhetorical tropes. For Gitlin, the idea of resistance in postmodern thought constitutes “merely another aspect of power, the means by which all-embracing power knew itself. In this fundamentally sadomasochistic world, resistance was swallowed up, doomed. In a time of political blockage on the broad scale, this is what the enclaves of the academic Left wanted to hear.”<sup>86</sup>

Richard Rorty also shared Gitlin’s skepticism. Two years after Gitlin’s book, Rorty published *Achieving our Country*, which called for a return to the cry for solidarity, while also acknowledging the gains of the New Left. “The heirs of that student left and the heirs of the older, reformist Left are still unreconciled with one another. I want to suggest that a reconciliation could be started by agreeing that the New Left accomplished something enormously important, something of which the reformist Left would probably never have been capable. It ended the Vietnam War.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams* (Metropolitan, 1995), 159.

<sup>87</sup> Rorty, 67.

Two decades later, the political scientist Mark Lilla perceived no such reconciliation. He provocatively stated, “Identity is Reaganism for lefties.”<sup>88</sup> Lilla is concerned that identity politics prevents the Democratic Party from holding institutional power. He finds problems in the concept of difference: “White men have one “epistemology,” black women have another. So what remains to be said?” The academic mishandling of the concept of power also troubles Lilla: “If your young student accepts the mystical idea that anonymous forces of power shape everything in life, she will be perfectly justified in withdrawing from democratic politics.”<sup>89</sup> Rather than engaging with Foucault and other postmodern figures as contemporaries who have something useful to say about power, Lilla treats these figures historically. While I do not believe in Foucault’s theory of power, I also think that these cultural ideas do not make as large of an impact as Lilla claims. Nevertheless, Lilla’s critique echoes both Todd Gitlin and Richard Rorty.

The Economic Research and Action Projects provide an example of student activism at the height of liberalism. It is an extreme example of class-consciousness, and it probably will not be repeated. At a time when the trend is towards the economic right, this particular kind of activism is especially important to remember.

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<sup>88</sup> Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal* (Harper Collins, 2017), 95.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

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