

Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: the Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006).

That today's youth would be curious about the New Left Weatherman/Weather Underground is certainly understandable. Weatherman, after all, appears to be the most radical segment of the most radical group of young whites in the most radical era of recent times. For young people living in the desert of contemporary politics, looking back on Weatherman and its time must indeed be exhilarating. Unfortunately, people stranded in a desert sometimes see water because they want to see it, and not because it's there. Such is the fascination that Weatherman exerts on radical youth today, Dan Berger's *Outlaws of America, the Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity*, being a prime case in point. Berger extols the group, seeking to accomplish three objectives with his book. First, he looks to "explain what drove the Weather Underground and why" and to "trace" the group's history and relation to Black and Third World struggles (12, 13, 102, 134, *et passim*). Second, he looks to "situate the group in the context of its times," (6, 13 273, 281 *et passim*). And finally, and perhaps most importantly, Berger wants to use his history of the Weatherman tendency as a means for arguing "that any progressive movement must make the struggle against white supremacy and white privilege central to any political work," (273-274).

Berger divides his well-written and fast-paced book into three sections. In the first he attempts to establish Weatherman's historical context by tracing the history of social struggles in the United States through the 1960s, with special attention to the development of the Black Power movement, the antiwar movement, and the most important white radical organization of the day, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Berger concludes this section with the emergence of the Weatherman political tendency in June 1969. In his second section Berger traces Weatherman's development over what he sees as two periods. From June 1969 to March 1970, in what Berger describes as a frenetic nine months, Weatherman moved rapidly from leadership over the mass organization SDS with 100,000 members, through street fighting and the beginnings of small, armed actions, to the planning of major anti-personnel bombings in the United States. Along the way, Weatherman allowed SDS to die and it alienated numerous allies, doing this in the name of building a more militant solidarity with the black struggle and with Vietnam. In March 1970, as a Weatherman member was constructing an antipersonnel bomb, it accidentally detonated, killing three Weathermen. This precipitated Weatherman's decision to go underground and Berger traces the Weather Underground Organization's (WUO) development from March 1970 into late 1976 and early 1977, when the organization disintegrated. During this period of underground activity, the WUO took credit for a score of bombings, including bombing a bathroom in the Pentagon, a bathroom in the Capitol Building, and a variety of other federal, state, and local government offices. The WUO also produced a polit-

ical statement during this time, *Prairie Fire*, fostered the growth of an aboveground organization, Prairie Fire Organizing Committee (PFOC), which it secretly controlled; and issued a half-dozen numbers of a political journal. In 1976, following a failed political conference organized by PFOC, PFOC members successfully challenged the WUO's control over PFOC. The political fallout from that challenge splintered the WUO. In *Outlaws'* final section, Berger seeks to draw political lessons from the Weatherman experience. Here and throughout the book he argues for the centrality of the politics of revolutionary solidarity with black and Third World struggles. In particular he convincingly underlines the importance of fighting for political prisoners in the United States.

While Berger's larger political objectives for his book are admirable, nonetheless, *Outlaws* is deeply flawed. In the first place, Berger puts far too much weight on his interviews with former Weathermen. In consequence, Berger, a young activist and scholar, has created what in reality is a collective political memoir. His book suffers then from the problems of the memoir: occasional self-criticism notwithstanding, Berger's interviewees justify their side of the story. For example, when Berger asks his interviewees, "What drove you and your comrades?" the answer, invariably, is some play on this thought: Weatherman "represented an insistence on up-front support for Black liberation as a centerpiece for any political movement among white people. It represented total commitment to a high level of militancy in relation to Vietnam" (quoting former Weatherman Robert Roth, 102). Or, in Berger's words: "Solidarity with Third World people and movements was the cornerstone of WUO politics and what most former members are proud of" (278). Not surprisingly, this is the same argument Weatherman made to distinguish itself back in 1969: "we are the only white radical formation to insist upon the centrality of the struggle for black and Third World liberation to the overall struggle for social change in the United States." How can we assess the validity of such claims? We do so by comparing Weatherman's claim with the organization's actual practice. Berger, however, is sparing in this effort, and to the extent that he does make these comparisons, he draws principally on his interviewees to justify the Weatherman position.

Let us take a specific case from Berger's book. In the fall of 1969, Weatherman, in the name of solidarity with the black liberation movement and with the Vietnamese, began organizing for a street-fighting national action slated for Chicago and subsequently known as 'The Days of Rage'. Early-on in Weatherman's organizing efforts, the Chicago Black Panther Party, under the leadership of an extraordinary activist, Fred Hampton, condemned the action. Hampton argued that Weatherman's plans for a deliberately provocative demonstration would bring down increased repression on Chicago's black community and he urged the white radicals to take up their real responsibility: organizing other whites against racism. A Puerto Rican revolutionary nationalist group with Chicago origins, the Young Lords Organization, similarly condemned the action. As Berger

acknowledges, this seems to be a fairly significant contradiction. But Berger, in 2006, explains away this contradiction, with as much ease as his protagonists explained it away in 1969. According to Berger:

the Black Panther Party was not a monolithic organization and... fissures within the group were becoming more apparent. ... because the Panthers were under such heavy attack, many in the group (including Hampton) wanted to build a broad united front for their own self-preservation. Weatherman's street antics were thus seen as alienating potential allies and bringing down serious repression. However, the New York Black Panthers largely cheered Weather's militancy (108).

Unfortunately, Berger does not base his account on a serious examination of the conflict; he does not interview former Chicago Panthers, nor does he seek out whatever documentary record exists from the time; and the Young Lords disappear from his account entirely. Instead, he bases his explanation on the oral histories offered by three former Weathermen. In other words, Berger, who with his book seeks to champion the centrality of the black struggle, fails to give prominent leaders of that struggle their own voice in criticizing Weatherman. Berger summarizes their argument for them in *two* sentences, and then undercuts this already truncated argument with the *false* claim—evidently provided by one or more of his interviewees and uncritically embraced by Berger—that the New York Panthers “cheered” Weatherman on at the time. The New York Panthers *would* support Weatherman's militancy further on down the road, but in the fall of 1969, *prior* to the Days of Rage, New York's Panther leadership, scattered throughout New York's penal system behind a government conspiracy indictment, were barely able to communicate with each other, much less take issue with Fred Hampton and the Chicago Panthers. If we recall that Berger wants to ‘situate’ Weatherman in the context of its time, and in the context of Black revolutionary leadership, certainly we have the right to expect more of Berger's handling of this contradiction than what he actually gives us. But in following the course he does, Berger simply replicates what Weatherman himself did in 1969: if we don't agree with a given black revolutionary leadership—even one so powerful as the Chicago Panthers under Fred Hampton—we needn't conduct a serious discussion about this evident contradiction, nor try to understand what the Panthers are saying; some other black revolutionary leadership will come along that we *can* ‘follow’.

Berger takes this same approach in explaining away other glaring contradictions between Weatherman's claims about itself and its actual practice. Most notably, he downplays Weatherman's part in the destruction of SDS; its disregard for the considered advice of the Vietnamese on building an antiwar movement; and

its actual relation to the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s. At the heart of all these errors lies Berger's argument—again, uncritically following his sources—that “Everything we did was being shaped by what was happening in Vietnam or in the Black Power movement” (quoting Donna Wilmott, on page 281, but a continual theme throughout). In reality, in the late 1960s, black and Third World liberation struggles *did* shape events and world culture as they had never done before, or since. But these struggles were not and could not have been more than one side of a contradiction. The other side of that contradiction in the United States was the power of white supremacy. And white supremacy shaped the whole of white society, the lives and consciousness of white radicals included. The young white people who organized and joined Weatherman were not blank slates responding to the external stimuli of black and Third World revolution. They were young people who had been raised in a society that for hundreds of years had privileged white over black, men over women, and the United States over the rest of the world. If we want to understand how it was that these young white people were able so easily to write off a Fred Hampton, or so self-confidently destroy SDS, trying to understand how white supremacy shaped these young people would be a fine place to start. Weatherman never made the kind of effort it needed to understand this simple reality. In *Outlaws of America*, despite the pleasing narrative he offers, Dan Berger has not yet made that effort either, and the goals he sets for himself are compromised by that failing.

(In the interests of full disclosure, I have a book being published in Fall 2007 by the Press of the University of Mississippi, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why it Failed*, in which I deal with Weatherman and other SDS factions. I am also an SDS veteran and was briefly associated with Weatherman.)

David Barber
University of Tennessee at Martin

Alan Sica and Stephen Turner, eds., *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

This book presents essays by nineteen accomplished and prominent sociologists, from the US and other countries, which attempt to account for their development as professionals and academicians in the context of what the editors believe are historically specific cohort-shaping experiences. In effect, the authors are asked to answer a question to which few of us are normally prepared to respond and to provide personally relevant information (beyond the simple facts of personal contacts, dates, encounters, schools attended, and the like) which is normally beyond first person explanation and for which the principles of selection are not and probably cannot be made clear. On the other hand, there is enough which is disarmingly