Building a Third Camp Tendency: An Interview with Samuel Farber
Kent Worcester

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Farber (1939-) is a prominent scholar, essayist, and political activist. Born and raised in Marianao, Cuba, Farber participated in the popular movement against the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship as a high school student. In 1958, he moved to the United States, where he shifted further left and embraced a third camp, anti-capitalist/anti-Stalinist perspective. He took part in the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley and played an active role in the Independent Socialist Clubs (ISC) and its successor organization, the International Socialists (IS) during the 1960s and 1970s. In recent years he has become a prolific political commentator, contributing to numerous online and print publications, including *Jacobin*, *New Politics, Foreign Policy in Focus, Havana Times, Spectre, Revista Sin Permiso,* and *La Joven Cuba* (the last two in Spanish).

Sam Farber received a B.A. from the University of Chicago, an M.A. from the London School of Economics (LSE), and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. He subsequently taught at the University of California at Los Angeles, SUNY-Old Westbury, Fairleigh Dickinson University, and Brooklyn College-CUNY, from which he retired in 2007. He is the author of six books: *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba, 1933-1960* (1976); *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (1990); *Social Decay and Transformation: A View from the Left* (2000); *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (2006); *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: A Critical Assessment* (2011); and *The Politics of Che Guevara: Theory and Practice* (2016).

Farber's books and articles on Cuban history and politics have established him as a leading authority on Castroism and Cuba in the twentieth century. He has also written on Latin American politics, Soviet Communism, and contemporary U.S. politics. His writings have attracted attention beyond academic circles due to the fact that he has been deeply critical of the Castro regime from a leftist and radically democratic and socialist perspective.

This interview is based on six conversations conducted via Zoom between September and December 2020. It has been lightly edited by the participants.

CUBAN BACKGROUND

Kent Worcester (KW): *Say something about your parents and your siblings.*

Samuel Farber (SF): My parents were Polish Jews who met in Cuba. My father arrived in Cuba in 1924, and my mother arrived in 1928. They met the year after she arrived, and they married in 1930. I am the youngest of three children. My older siblings are both dead. My sister would have been 89 this year, and my brother would have been 84.

Fig. 1 Samuel Farber's Kindergarten Class (top row, third child from the left) in Marianao, Cuba (1944-1945)

My parents were originally small shopkeepers. My father hated retail trade, so he became a middleman in the workingman's pants section of the garment industry in Cuba. The post-World War II period in Cuba was a boom period, in part because the price of sugar went up. I remember when we first got a telephone. I was about seven years old. Before then, if you wanted to get in touch with my parents, you would phone neighbours of ours who lived across the street, and they would tell us that we got a telephone call. At some point in the period, my parents replaced our

ice box with a refrigerator. In 1951, when I was almost twelve, they bought their first car, a 1950 Plymouth. My childhood was a time of increased affluence, but we continued to live in an old house that was right next to my parents' business. Our living room and dining room served as passages into the business. In 1952, shortly after I became thirteen years old, we rented a much nicer house a couple of blocks from the famous *Tropicana* nightclub. This was a newer and solidly middle-class area where we never got to really know our neighbours. But since my parents' business remained where it always was in the old mixed class *barrio* and we were duty bound to help my parents at work, we continued to "hang around" there more than in our new neighbourhood, which was actually only one and a half miles away.

There was no real separation between home and work in our family. My siblings and I were constantly pitching in to help with the business. My parents worked seven days a week. They had no time to entertain us, so we were dependent on our neighbours, who would sometimes take us out to baseball games, eating out at Spanish restaurants and shopping in downtown Havana. The town we lived in, Marianao, was adjacent to Havana. I grew up in a real neighbourhood. Right next door to us was a tenement block.

I remember the hurricane of 1944. Some of the people from the tenement came to our house to take shelter. It was that kind of neighbourhood. I had a middle-class upbringing but it was very different from the kind of middle-class upbringing that postwar Americans enjoyed in the new suburbs. For one thing, we were close to people who came from very different class and racial backgrounds.

KW: *Did your parents encourage you and your siblings to read books?*

SF: Not at all. Apart from textbooks I didn't read any serious books until I was in my late teens. There were very few books in our house, mostly on Jewish-related themes and a couple of encyclopedias. My brother and sister became interested in classical music, and so we had some records. We also had a piano in our living room that my sister had played when she was younger. We had a subscription to *Selecciones,* the Spanish-language version of *Reader's Digest*, but my parents were fundamentally apolitical. Nor were they religious in any strict sense, but rather culturally traditional in the Eastern European Jewish manner. They were not historic Zionists but like almost every Jew in Cuba they were horrified by the Holocaust (I lost innumerable uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins in Nazi-occupied Poland) and supportive of the new state of Israel, for which my father later helped to raise funds.

In 1945 I started attending a Jewish school where the instruction was half in Spanish and half in Yiddish. It was a pain in the neck. I had to travel seven miles to school and had to go home for lunch and then go back again. Totally crazy. The school

had been founded by Bundists and other supporters of the Yiddish language in the 1920s. By the time that I was growing up there was nothing left of the Bundist tradition and the school had become Zionist. The state of Israel was founded when I was finishing the third grade. Interestingly, it was the war over the founding of Israel that made me start to pay attention to the newspapers. I wasn't yet reading books, but I read the newspapers with a great deal of interest. Not surprisingly for a child of my background, I supported the Jews and not the Arabs, but knew nothing about the historical background of Arabs and Jews in Palestine. All I knew was that the Jews had been wiped out in Europe and that this was a way of achieving a secure survival for those who were still alive. My parents started contributing money to Israel around this time. The last time that I ever prayed was at my Bar Mitzvah.

I remember joking that when I finally visited Israel, I would look for our family's forest because we were always donating money for planting trees as gifts. For my Bar Mitzvah, I got about half a dozen Parker 51 pens. I used one after the other until I was in graduate school in Berkeley. They were good pens! I also got lots of wallets and, as I said before, trees in Israel. Fictional trees, of course.

KW: *Did your siblings stay in Cuba?*

SF: No. Both my brother and I left before the Revolution. My sister and parents left almost two years later in late 1960.

During high school I became politically active, which by definition meant oppositionist politics. I was even arrested as a result of my political activities. Since this happened in late 1955, before politics got really hot in the island, the prosecutor dropped the charges at the trial against me and the rest of the group of students who were arrested at the same time as I was. The trial took place in the early part of 1956, which was the same year that I graduated from high school.

After graduating from high school, I attended law school, but only for about six weeks. One of the things we studied was Roman law, which I thought was as boring as hell, but I was actually interested in the totally new knowledge I acquired in a course called Antropología Jurídica, a rough equivalent of forensic medicine. The campus was shut down by the university authorities as a safety measure in November of 1956. I continued to be supportive of the 26th of July Movement but since I was not attending school I was no longer at the centre of the action and remained on the fringes selling the movement's bonds and visiting political prisoners with my closest friends. Things were starting to really heat up. Once there was no longer school, I spent most of my time helping with the family business. My brother, who had studied electrical engineering at university, decided to move to Chicago, where we had a large family on my mother's side. A year later I joined him.

Through personal connections, I was able to get into the University of Chicago. At first the University did not want to even consider my application because they had a policy that they would not consider undergraduate applicants from abroad unless they had already studied at a US institution for at least one year. My first application was turned down right off the bat. But some of my cousins had connections and the next thing I knew I was admitted.

KW: *What were you planning to study?*

SF: I postponed my major at the University of Chicago because I planned to return to Cuba and be useful to the new revolutionary government. It was only after the government had taken a clear Stalinist turn that I decided not to return and decided to major in Sociology.

KW: *When were you politicized?*

SF: Batista's coup had taken place during my first year of high school. He came to power in 1952. As a result, the atmosphere in my high school was definitely one of political protest. We were nationalists but not anti-imperialists. Terms like "imperialism" and even "leftist" were only used by people who were in the Communist Party or very close to it. Most of us were democratic populists who wanted a clean and democratic government. We favoured democracy, agrarian reform, the nationalization of public utilities and a generous welfare state. I thought of FDR as a god. I had many criticisms of US foreign policy, for supporting various dictators and so on, but that does not mean that I was anti-imperialist. We also rejected the US in cultural terms—for the cold, highly individualistic and impersonal human relations it encouraged. Cuba then and now has a very effervescent, good-humoured type of culture. There is racism, but in a different package than in the US

I'll give you an example. My brother had two study partners, one of whom was black. This was in Cuba. The woman who was my uncle's second wife, a pretentious woman originally from Warsaw no less, came to visit us at our new rented house and saw the study partner and said in Yiddish, "What is this *schvartze* doing here?" I was infuriated. My parents were not anti-racist, but they certainly would not have thought in those terms, much less used a term like that. Some of their ideas might have had racist implications, but they were not elitists and they didn't place any weight on these issues. The fact that my brother had black friends, and that I had black friends, did not concern them. What might have concerned them was the fact that I did not have as many Jewish friends as they had hoped.

KW: *How did you end up picking "Sergio Junco" as your pseudonym when you started writing articles on Cuba for the IS press in Britain?*

SF: There was a black Cuban named Sandalio Junco who had been a Trotskyist and then a trade union leader before he was killed by the Stalinists in 1942. He was an important Latin American political figure during the Comintern days in the twenties.

KW: *Did you ever try to return to Cuba once you relocated to the United States?*

SF: No. First of all, it was very difficult to travel to Cuba in those days. Also, when I returned to the United States in 1963, after having spent a year in England, I had a green card. I was nervous about losing my immigrant status. I wasn't going to travel anywhere outside the country and I certainly was not going to go back to Cuba. I thought there was a chance that if I returned to Cuba that I would be arrested. I wasn't well known, so perhaps they would have let me back in. But it was rare for Cubans to return to Cuba unless they had a connection to the regime.

I applied for US citizenship in 1968. It wasn't until 1971 that it was granted. When I applied, I decided that I was not going to lie about my political affiliations, in case they caught me in a lie and invalidated my citizenship and threw me out of the country. But once I let them know about my affiliations, they placed me in a separate track and assigned me an attorney as my case officer. And then they sat on the application. On the one hand, they didn't want me as a citizen, but on the other hand they didn't have any legal grounds for turning me down. I hadn't broken any laws.

Rowland Watts, who was the head of the Workers Defense League, recommended that I get in touch with a prominent attorney in Los Angeles who had been on Nixon's enemies list: J.B. Tietz. I paid him $600 as a retainer and Tietz got to work. Eventually they threw in the towel. They probably figured that going to trial would be a waste of time and resources. So, they just gave in. I became a citizen on December 17, 1971. It took a little over three years.

KW: *When did the Castro regime start paying attention to critics like yourself?*

SF: My first book didn't come out until 1976 and I don't think they paid any attention to anything I'd written before that time. I doubt that they had any idea who Sergio Junco was or that they even knew about him. The first time I went back to Cuba was in 1979, and it did not seem as if they knew who I was. In fact, I don't think I caught their attention until 2003. This was when I worked with Joanne Landy and the Campaign for Peace and Democracy to publicize the fact that the regime had recently imprisoned 75 people for their political beliefs. We prepared a statement

that was signed by many prominent people on the left. Even so, I returned to Cuba in 2000 and in 2007 and had no problems.

My interest in traveling to Cuba has declined over the years. Traveling to Cuba is expensive. The last time my wife Selma Marks and I visited we spent close to $1,000 in gifts. Almost everyone I know there is having a hard time economically. Several of my classmates from high school have passed away, and some of the others left the country in recent years, so I don't know as many people there as I used to.

CHICAGO AND LONDON

KW: *Presumably the University of Chicago was different from what you had been used to, in academic terms and in other respects as well.*

SF: I initially had a hard time at the University of Chicago. I had a decent public high school education in Cuba in terms of content, but not in terms of method. We didn't write essays—we took exams. And I didn't encounter a serious academic book other than textbooks until I was 16 or 17 years old. When I arrived at the University of Chicago, I had to write a lot of papers. That was hard. A lot of my peers were the children of academics and other professionals, and their backgrounds were very different from mine.

But I also learned from these students. One of my friends at Chicago was Michael Rogin. When I was an undergraduate there, he was a graduate student. And then at Berkeley he was a member of the faculty when I was a graduate student. We knew each other for many years. He was a member of my dissertation committee and gave me line-by-line comments on my dissertation, a very generous gift of his time and effort.

KW: *The University of Chicago was one of the few places that had an organized contingent of third camp socialists.*

SF: I started attending the University in June 1958. My first contact with the Shachtmanites was indirect. I was walking across the campus and picked up a leaflet that somebody had dropped. The leaflet was about the invasion of Lebanon in 1958 by the United States and spoke of it in third camp terms. I thought it made sense but paid no more attention to it.

Shortly after the overthrow of Batista—I'm talking about only a few days after—I saw a poster on campus that was sponsored by the Politics Club. I had no idea at the time, but the Shachtmanites were the main group involved in the Club, as were a number of left-liberals, such as the political scientist David Greenstone. David

was a good friend of Mike Rogin and died quite young.

Anyway, the Politics Club organized a talk in January 1959 on what was taking place in Cuba. The advertised speaker was a Greek-American lawyer named Konstantin Kangles, who had represented the 26th of July Movement in Chicago, but he wasn't able to give the talk because he was still in Cuba. The airport in Havana was closed for several days. My older brother was also stranded in Cuba, where he was visiting his girlfriend.

At the meeting itself, one of the members of the Politics Club pointed out that there were several students from Cuba in the room and invited us to speak. I said my piece, and I remember that I was totally wrong about what I said. I had read a couple of interviews with Castro from 1958 (especially the one in *Coronet* magazine, in which he said that nationalization was a bad idea and so on). Based on that, I said that this was not going to be a social revolution, but merely a political revolution. I was sophisticated enough to know the difference. After the meeting, I talked to some of the Club's members, who were also members of the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL), which is what the younger Shachtmanites belonged to. That was the day I also met for the first time Joanne Landy and Joel Geier.

Two key Shachtmanites in Chicago at the time were Ray and Nancy Ahern, who were members of the Socialist Party. YPSL was the party's youth group. They were both at the meeting on Cuba. Ray worked at the University's Billings hospital, and we used to have lunch together in the hospital's dining room and talk about politics. It was a little later (1960) that I joined YPSL as a non-public member. I did not want to forfeit my student visa.

I returned to Cuba in the summer of 1959 and stayed for the entire summer. But the situation at home was quite uncomfortable because I had become radicalized and my parents and my sister were against the revolution, whereas my brother was still supportive but not radicalized like me. I came back to the US in part because I couldn't live with them. At the time I assumed that I would finish my studies at the University of Chicago and then return to Cuba. It was only when I decided to stay in the US that I selected Sociology as my major. Before then, I had thought about majoring in Social Welfare or Economics because I thought it would be useful when I returned home. It seemed more practical.

After a while, I started doing better in college. For one thing, my English was getting better. And that's when I got the idea of going to England to pursue a graduate degree, in great part to avoid having to renew my Cuban passport with a Cuban puppet regime that the press thought Washington wanted to establish someplace, inside Cuba if possible. The person I consulted the most about whether to go to England

or not was George Rawick who was teaching at U of C. I remember having dinner with him, and he was very helpful. He was the one who pointed me toward the London School of Economics (LSE). My main tutor at LSE was Robert McKenzie. He could be difficult to meet with because he was always rushing off to appear on the BBC as a kind of British (he was actually Canadian) Eric Sevareid. Ten years later I visited him, and he didn't remember me. That was a bit of a letdown.

When I was in London, I joined the Young Socialists, which was affiliated to the Labour Party. One of the tendencies inside the Young Socialists were the Cliffites, who had a paper called *Young Guard* (1962-66). The paper's editorial board included independent socialists who were not in the IS itself. There was a competitor to *Young Guard* called *Keep Left* (1950-85), which was the paper of the Healyites. I lived in LSE housing and was in the same part of London as Nigel and Tirril Harris, and Mike and Nina Kidron. I also renewed my Chicago friendship with Gavin MacFadyen, who later became a reporter for *The World in Action*, the British equivalent of *60 Minutes* and a documentary filmmaker. Many years later, he also made his mark as an investigative reporter and became the mentor of Julian Assange. Gavin was a very expansive kind of guy, brimming with talent, very loud laughter, and affection for people like me.

KW: *When did you decide to get a Ph.D.?*

SF: Once I started graduate school it seemed like the natural thing to do. I knew that I did not want to return to Cuba given the nature of the post-revolutionary regime. At some point I read *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) by C. Wright Mills and was very excited by it. A whole number of people from my generation, such as Richard Flacks, went into Sociology because of Mills.

KW: *By the time you were in London did you think of yourself as a "third camper"?*

SF: Oh sure. At Chicago I was in a bubble, in that I mostly knew people who were in or around YPSL. This gave me the impression that the organization was much bigger than it actually was. They had 50-60 people in Chicago, so I figured they had thousands of members across the United States. That shows you how naïve I was. To this day it is hard for me to get my head around the fact that the left is so small in this country. Clearly socialism is no longer invisible. But many people on the left have an exaggerated sense of how significant the socialist movement is in this country even after 2016. The left has established an important beachhead but the inland political invasion is yet to begin.

SHACHTMAN AND CLIFF

KW: *Did you ever meet Max Shachtman?*

SF: Yes. I bought his book on *The Bureaucratic Revolution* (1962) and heard him speak four times. The first time I saw him speak was in 1959. Ray Ahern invited me to see him speak on "The Illusion of Permanence." The graphic showed a donkey and an elephant riding a merry-go-round. The talk was held in the tearoom in the Social Sciences building. Half of his talk went over my head because I knew very little about American politics. At the end of the meeting, I was introduced to him. I remember asking him if Roosevelt was a socialist. I don't remember what he said, but he was very friendly and patient with me. I heard him again several more times. I saw him speak the next year on imperialism and national liberation, and I thought his talk was excellent. And I saw him speak at the Quaker House at the University of Chicago, and then again just before I left for England.

KW: *Can you see the appeal that Shachtman had for the generation of people like Julius Jacobson and Irving Howe?*

SF: I do. He was an excellent speaker if a little long winded.

KW: *Did the Shachtmanites and the Cliffites seem like they were from two distinct tendencies that marched together for a time? Or did they seem like outposts of the same political tendency?*

SF: This was before the age of the Internet, of course, and even traveling across the Atlantic was rare before the 1960s. There was not as much communication between the two groups as you might think. I first heard about the Socialist Review Group, which became the British IS, when I stopped off at New York on my way to LSE and met for the first time with the Jacobsons. The first issue of *New Politics* had just come out, and I promised them that I would distribute copies to bookshops in London. Julie and Phyllis encouraged me to get in touch with Mike Kidron, and I did. I liked Mike and Nina Kidron very much and spent a lot of time with them. In general, I found the IS group less elitist than the Shachtmanites, who suffered from what I might call a "cult of the heavies." I liked the atmosphere of the group in the early 1960s. And the Jacobsons seemed much less interested in developing new writers than Kidron and Cliff were.

There were other points of contact. Mike Kidron visited Berkeley and stayed at my Berkeley apartment in the mid-sixties. By coincidence, another ISer, John Palmer, was also on the West Coast that year and for a short time I managed to find room for both of them in my apartment.

KW: *Just to be clear: you never thought of the British IS as Shachtmanite?*

SF: Not really. The difference between the bureaucratic collectivist perspective and the state-capitalist perspective was significant. As I said, I liked the people I met in the British group, but I always felt that the state-capitalist perspective had an adverse impact on how the British IS assessed various manifestations of Communism in the Third World. In theorizing about third-world Communism, I always placed far more emphasis on ideology and politics than they did. Their approach suffered from a certain degree of reductionism. In my view, they were very weak in terms of understanding third-world Stalinism.

KW: *In the case of Hal Draper, and Julie and Phyllis Jacobson, who they were in 1960 is more or less who they were in their final years. Their trajectory is not particularly dramatic.*

SF: I agree.

KW: *Whereas Tony Cliff devolves from this jovial, eccentric, broad-minded figure to a far more sectarian individual who acts as if the party is everything and the movement is nothing. He shifts from Luxemburg to a certain version of Lenin, in other words. Did you see the seeds of this shift in the early 1960s? Or do you look back and say, "What the hell happened?"*

SF: That's an excellent question. I didn't foresee the turn at all. I respected Cliff and took him seriously and learned a lot from a class he taught on Marxist economics. I still have the syllabus somewhere. But I also detected a crudity that turned me off. At the time he was writing a book on the collectivization of agriculture. I went to his house several times to help him with the project. Having attended the University of Chicago, I was trained in proper footnoting and so on. He told me, "You're too German." And when Gavin MacFadyen and I visited him in his house near Arsenal tube station in the middle of the 1962 missile crisis, he quite seriously told us, "Don't worry, there won't be a war between the US and the USSR because the rate of profit is too high." So, in retrospect there were some signs. He was never a mentor to me in the way that Draper and Kidron were. I respected him, and learned from him, but he was never my favourite.

I also liked Jim Higgins, who was a real character. A tremendous sense of humuor. His book about the SWP (*More Years for the Locust*, 2012) is quite accurate. There were also leaders of the youth group who, for reasons that I never quite understood, never became major national leaders of the IS, such as Chris Davidson. He was the editor of *Young Guard* and was from a working-class background. He became a bus

driver. He's probably retired by now. I liked him a lot when I was a supporter of the paper.

The British group was more grounded in the working class than the Shachtmanites. I was also active in the National Association of Labour Student Organisations (NALSO) when I was at the LSE. I also belonged to the IS group in the St. Pancras area of London. Some of the members of the LSE NALSO branch were from working class backgrounds, but not too many. Quite a few of the IS people I met in London were from the working class. At the same time, none of the people I knew at LSE had part-time jobs, whereas almost everyone at the University of Chicago needed to work in order to make ends meet. At the time the student grants in England were quite generous, which was fantastic while at the same time the number of college students of working class background was certainly much smaller than after the explosion of British higher education in the late sixties.

BERKELEY IN THE SIXTIES

KW: *You arrived in Berkeley in time to take part in the Free Speech Movement. Can you say something about the FSM from a personal perspective? Was it one of the biggest moments of your life? Did it give you hope for the future?*

SF: All of the above. They were great days. And there is an organizational context for this. When I arrived at Berkeley in the fall of 1963, there was already a substantial amount of political mobilization that was taking place all centered in the civil rights movement. But I had to avoid getting arrested because of the fact that I was not a citizen yet. I was already a member of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], which at the time was an important civil rights organization. Although I couldn't take part in their direct actions, I helped out in their Berkeley make shift headquarters when an action was taking place such as the "shop in" at Berkeley's Lucky supermarket (CORE activists would pile up merchandise on their carts and "change their minds" about buying it when they got to the cashier).

YPSL was pretty much dead by this point, except on paper. The local branch of the Socialist Party had something called the Democratic Socialist Club, in which Hal Draper was a central figure. His approach was very different from Tony Cliff's. Cliff was a hands-on organizational person. Draper was not. During the five years that I belonged to the Berkeley branch of the Independent Socialist Club, he never once served on the Executive Committee. He gave talks and offered incredibly useful advice. He had lots of insights about strategy and tactics for those of us in the FSM. He was very shrewd. But he didn't take organizational responsibility. This was also true of the SP's Democratic Socialist Club, which as a result was pretty stagnant. Art Lipow was another leader of the group, but while he liked to talk and promise

a lot, he didn't deliver much. In retrospect, it was a pretty depressing place. There were also people in the Democratic Socialist Club who really didn't belong there.

And then the Free Speech Movement emerged in the fall of 1964—more or less at the exact same time as the formation of the Independent Socialist Clubs (ISC). Pure coincidence. Thankfully that meant the death of the Democratic Socialist Club. And it was a new life. It lifted me out of a depression that I was not even aware of. I even started to do much better in graduate school, and developed a working relationship with Neil Smelser, who of course was a leading sociologist and employed me as a Research Assistant in several occasions.

Not only that, but during my first year at Berkeley I had seriously considered dropping out of the Ph.D. program. After all, I had a master's degree from the LSE and at that time you could still land an academic job with just an MA at a community college or even some four-year colleges. More than anything else, what kept me from dropping out of the program was the military draft. I was 25, and they were drafting men as old as 26.

KW: *What was the ISC branch like? Did it place a heavy emphasis on recruitment? Was there a push for rapid growth during the FSM period?*

SF: I was never very good at recruiting new members. Joanne Landy was good at that; Joel Geier was good at that. But I did a lot of tabling in front of Sproul Hall and gave the occasional talk.

KW: *How many full-timers did the ISC have?*

SF: None. We were very new, and we had no money. Anne Draper worked for the garment workers union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, and would sometimes hire members of the group to picket (the brand HIS that was being boycotted by the union) that were hard off, such as Jack Weinberg, and Marvin Garson and Barbara Garson, who was very close to us but never joined unlike Marvin who was an active member.

KW: *At what point during the decade were you most optimistic?*

SF: 1964-65 and also 1967-1968. The ISC was growing in those two periods, and within a few years the group had over a hundred members in the Bay Area. There were branches in San Francisco, East Bay, and of course Berkeley. It was also a politically and intellectually stimulating time.

One of my criticisms of the IS, which was formed in 1969 out of the ISC, was that

it moved people around without any regard for conserving what they had already built. Lots of people were pulled out of the Bay Area, including Mike Parker, and told to move to Detroit. The Bay Area branches were left headless. Surprise, surprise—they shrank.

I had an experience with this when I moved to Los Angeles. We had recruited a group of Black radicals who called themselves the Socialist Collective. This was in 1974. The first thing that the people in Detroit did was to instruct the group's two main leaders to move to Detroit and join the leadership bodies. Within less than one month after they moved none of the other members of the Collective were coming to our meetings. Only one out of the 18 or 20 new Black members stuck around. What they should have done was send a leader from Detroit to Los Angeles to help integrate the whole Socialist Collective into the IS.

KW: *One of the things that is remarkable about the sixties is how rapidly things changed. From your point of view, were the hippies a distraction or something that you welcomed? Did the counterculture derail what you were trying to do?*

SF: There is a geographical factor that is worth mentioning. Most of the hippies were in San Francisco rather than Berkeley. They were in Berkeley too, of course. One development that angered me was the so-called filthy speech movement, which emerged shortly after the FSM. That really angered me. It was a question of moving from the sublime to the ridiculous. At its core the Free Speech Movement was about asserting our right to let students on campus know about civil rights and other important issues. In the eyes of the public the two causes—the FSM and the filthy speech movement—became conflated.

I have later reflected on the question of why I was so disgusted by the filthy speech movement. Keep in mind that I first became politically active in Cuba. I wasn't a socialist, but I was political. We were operating in a context where a majority of the population, to one degree or another, was against the Batista regime. It was a regime without a strong social base. So, I always had the sense that politics is about appealing to the majority of the people. To this day, anything that builds a stylistic or cultural barrier between us and them that is not justified by substantive politics, such as for example the initially unpopular gay movement, is a deep mistake. And I am against this notion that you are not responsible to anyone but yourself.

KW: *Did you find that as the sixties wore on various forms of ultraleft politics would keep popping up? Even in the IS there were people who argued against working within the unions.*

SF: Some of the people who had been recruited out of Student for a Democratic Society (SDS) in Chicago were ultraleft. But that was not a problem in Berkeley while I was there.

KW: *When you look back, do you think it was a mistake to form the IS? Or had the ISC run its course?*

SF: The ISC was overly decentralized—branches were mostly left to their own devices—but the IS became too rigidly centralized after the 1973 split. In 1975, I was paying $100/month in dues, all of which went to the centre in Detroit although of course the group's publications were subsidized by Detroit and the organizer that we had sometimes was also paid by Detroit (although selected without any formal, institutional consultation with the branch). And my salary at UCLA was around $16,000/year. Even now what I paid in dues would be a lot of money. Not every member paid as much in dues—I was making more than some others so my dues were higher.

THE JACOBSONS

KW: *When did you start spending time with Julius and Phyllis Jacobson?*

SF: I used to visit New York City from time to time because my sister lived there. Julie had a machine shop on Great Jones Street, between Lafayette and the Bowery, and I used to go there and talk politics. At one point, he and Phyllis were having an argument with Hal [Draper] about whether to support Eldridge Cleaver, who was the presidential candidate of the Peace and Freedom Party in 1968. The ISC had already endorsed Cleaver and participated in his campaign. At the time it struck me as a matter of tactics and strategy rather than principles. In arguing against this position, the Jacobsons were vituperative. They were literally screaming at Hal. After that I decided to avoid these kinds of arguments with them. Many years later, we lived near each other in Brooklyn and I saw them quite often.

KW: *I never saw that side of Phyllis and Julie, although I've heard about it. I once suggested to Joanne Landy that she and Tom Harrison were like the "children" of the Jacobsons, that people like Mark Dow and myself were the "grandchildren," and that they were much stricter with the kids than they were with the grandkids. They didn't expect as much from us and were grateful that there were people from our generation who were around New Politics.*

SF: There could be something to that. But I was never a disciple of theirs in the way that Tom and Joanne were. I was much closer to Hal Draper and Joel Geier—Joel and I are still friends, in fact. When Hal was working as an acquisitions librarian

at Berkeley I used to regularly stop by his desk and ask his opinion on various issues. He was a mentor to me. He personally changed when he got older, however, and became a bit harder and bitter in his approach. He became more interested in putting people down than winning them over.

Phyllis and Julie were both quite sectarian when it came to the question of the Communist Party, of course. They were complete Stalinophobes. And they never tempered or modulated their approach. Sometimes it is better to hold back a little in terms of saying everything that you think. I remember a panel that the Jacobsons organized at the Socialist Scholars Conference. It was awful. Julie ranted about being an anti-Communist without considering the term's connotations.

THE ACADEMY

KW: *Did you always know that you were going to write a dissertation on Cuban politics?*

SF: When I was a student, I often wrote papers on different aspects of Cuban history and politics. For example, I remember taking a seminar with Reinhard Bendix at Berkeley. He had written this rather important work on *Work and Authority in Industry* (1956) and was a former socialist who became an expert on Max Weber. His book on industry was a serious book—it's not a Marxist account but it's very good. I wrote a paper for his class on the labour laws that the Cuban government enacted in the early 1960s, which in retrospect was the high watermark of the CP's influence on the regime. The legislation was copied from similar legislation that had been passed in the USSR. He liked the paper. I had all this stuff in my system, and I had to get it out. I wasn't thinking in terms of an audience. Bendix was on leave during 1964-65 and missed the Free Speech Movement. But he was close friends with the Chancellor of the University, Clark Kerr. When he returned to campus he moved to the right. He was so angry with some of his colleagues that he transferred to the Political Science department. I had some good conversations with him before the FSM period, however. Harold Wilensky, who was an industrial sociologist, moved to the Political Science department for similar reasons. As it happens, Wilensky's son was a member of IS for a time.

KW: *Who supervised your dissertation?*

SF: I wrote the first draft on my own and then went shopping around for a committee. William Kornhauser was my main advisor and Michael Rogin served as another advisor. Kornhauser was very helpful but Mike really got into it and offered detailed comments. The third advisor on my committee was Arthur Stinchcombe, whom I later found out had been a comrade back in the day. I remember hearing

Stinchcombe say that "If Kornhauser is willing to sign off on this, I don't need to read it." I would never have dared to do such a thing.

KW: *A great deal of ink was spilled in the sixties and seventies on the question of "revolutionary intellectuals." Did you write your dissertation for a movement audience?*

SF: Not really.

LOS ANGELES

KW: *When did you move to Los Angeles?*

SF: In 1968, the day after Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. I figured that if I stayed in Berkeley, I would never finish my dissertation. In those days you could get a tenure-track job without a completed dissertation. I finished writing the dissertation in March 1969 and remember returning to Berkeley a few days later to file the paperwork. I arrived on the same day that helicopters were dropping gas canisters on the People's Park protesters.

KW: *The ISC was much stronger in the Bay Area than Los Angeles.*

SF: Absolutely. It barely existed. Jack Weinberg was in LA, but he lived a long way from Santa Monica. When I arrived, there was no branch to speak of. I knew very few people in the city. On the weekends, I would drive to UCLA and call my friends in Berkeley from my office. Phone calls were expensive in those days but entirely free if I called using the University of California "tie-line."

We gradually built a branch, however. One of our members was Ed Pearl, a music promoter who owned a well-known night club called the Ash Grove that featured many interesting folk and blues musicians— people like Linda Ronstadt, Taj Mahal, the Chambers Brothers, and so on. He was a very talented guy, but could be capricious and was not a disciplined thinker. We later had to ask him to resign when he fired several workers at Ash Grove who were trying to form a union.

KW: *What sorts of priorities did the branch adopt? Reaching out to migrant workers? Recruiting students? Building a base inside the labour movement?*

SF: We maintained a presence on the UCLA campus, and took part in antiwar protests and so on. By 1973, when there was a split in the IS, we had a sizable branch. At some point Steve Kindred moved to Los Angeles and was very involved in Teamster work. In 1970, there was an important wildcat strike that he very actively

supported. There was a group that was close to the IS called the Student/Worker Action Committee that did very important rank-and-file work and some of its leaders like Bob and Johanna Brenner later joined us. The grape boycott was also going on and we took part in supporting the farmworkers. Ron Tabor, who helped lead the 1973 split that led to the formation of the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL), moved to LA at some point but his approach was too excessively programmatic for my taste. He influenced the branch in its lack of support for the Chicano Moratorium in 1970. I was thrilled with the emergence of the Chicano movement and was so angry at the branch leadership [position] that I took a six-month leave of absence. Eric Flint, who later became an important science fiction writer, was a member. He was an easy-going guy that I enjoyed talking to. He was the leader of the branch right before the 1973 split.

One thing that concerned me was that the national leadership, which was based in Detroit, did not do a very good job of educating new members about the group's politics. As a result, the LA branch was a bit unmoored and ended up moving in an orthodox Trotskyist direction. There was also a workerist mentality in the IS. I was never asked to industrialize since I was already a professor. But a lot of people were pressured to find jobs in factories. In the mid-1970s, I was pressured to move to East Los Angeles, where the city's Hispanic working class was based. Why I went along with it I will never know. It turned out to be an interesting experience, but I was only there less than a year at which point I moved to New York. Those were the kinds of pressures that members faced.

The organization also became less democratic in this period, under the influence of the Brits. There was one IS leader who had moved from Britain—Glenn Wolfe—whom I despise to this day. For a time, he was our National Secretary. I used to refer to him as a used-car-dealer socialist. To this day, it's not clear to me whether he was acting on behalf of the British SWP or not. But he was part of the reason why the group became less democratic. Let me give you an example. There was a woman member in our branch who was not very active, but if she didn't like something that the branch was doing, she would say so, although in a non-disruptive and respectful manner. Glenn showed up in Los Angeles and told us that we should expel her, for no good reason. He was a despicable person. There were lots of people I disagreed with in the IS but there were only two people that I personally disliked. One was Glenn Wolfe, and the other was the leader of the Boston branch. Compared to that Boston guy the people in Detroit were liberals.

KW: *Was there a point at which you considered yourself an oppositionist?*

SF: Of course. I'll give you an example. In 1974 I was a member of the National Committee (NC). The workload meant that I did not have much time to read any-

thing apart from internal documents and so on. I am a very responsible person, and an anxious person, so when I accepted the responsibility, I took it seriously. I was also involved in strike support work in the San Fernando valley, which was an hour's drive there and an hour back. The stress affected my personal life and also my intellectual life.

When I was in the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL) and later in the ISC and the pre-1973 IS, we always circulated minutes of the meetings of leadership bodies. But when I was on the NC a decision was made, confirmed by the group's Convention, to stop distributing minutes. The reason was that Glenn and some of the others wanted to turn the leadership into a faction, and they did not want the membership to know when members of the Committee disagreed with one another. I found this thoroughly undemocratic and secretive. I published a document about my concerns but got very little support. That to me was a big step in moving away from internal democracy. The following year I was dropped from the NC slate. This is what I would call a morbid sign.

KW: *I take it you were never drawn toward Sy Landy's group during the 1973 faction fight, which developed an interest in aspects of orthodox Trotskyism, such as the Transitional Program and an "imminent crisis" perspective.*

SF: I hated that stuff.

KW: *What about Cal and Barbara Winslow, who led the 1976-77 faction fight that produced the International Socialist Organization?*

SF: I didn't know them well initially, although when they invited me to Seattle to give a talk in 1971, they treated me royally. I was embarrassed! But in terms of the issues that they later raised, I didn't agree with them either. For one thing, I broadly agreed with the policy of industrialization, although not in the way that it was handled. In some cases, the pressure to industrialize was based on liberal guilt and sometimes resulted in driving away members and even ruining people's lives.

At UCLA, I got to know Richard Healey, whose mother, Dorothy Healey, had been a leading Communist Party member in California. He later became a leader of the New American Movement. A really nice fellow. He used to tell me about what it was like to be a member of the CPUSA during the McCarthy period, when the party told members who had been doctors and lawyers and so on to get jobs in basic industries. He said it was a total disaster. And this was at a time when the party was facing severe repression. Circumstances were very different in the 1970s and yet the IS sometimes acted like a crackdown was around the corner. I remember people in the group learning how to handle guns and that sort of thing. It was very

low key, and actually an interesting experience in many ways.

KW: *Did the LA branch ever try to connect with people in Hollywood, such as scriptwriters or people in the craft unions?*

SF: Not really. We were too small. The only person who knew people in Hollywood was Ed Pearl. One time he called me and asked if I was doing anything, and he invited me to watch the production of an ABC/Paramount recording session with B.B. King with him. I was sitting a few feet from B.B. King playing and for free. One of Ed's brothers (he was himself an excellent guitar player) was a studio musician who was working on the recording. And at UCLA I had students whose parents were connected to the film industry, whether as performers, lawyers, technicians, or backup personnel of one kind or another.

KW: *The ISO split came only a few years after the earlier faction fight with the Landy-Tabor group. Did these feel like successive gut punches?*

SF: Oh yes. The 1973 split was proportionally bigger, but the ISO split was very damaging. I found it depressing. By that point I was living in New York. And when a third split took place in 1979, the one that produced the Workers Power group around Steve Zeluck and others, I threw in the towel. I couldn't take another faction fight and resigned.

NEW YORK CITY

KW: *Were you happy to leave the West Coast and move to New York City?*

SF: On the whole, yes. For a few years I lived in Hoboken and took the PATH train into the city. What I didn't quite realize was the generally low level of the US system of higher education. I was extremely lucky to attend the University of Chicago, which was as tough as hell. But I learned a lot and had a great education. Then I went to LSE, and after that Berkeley. After leaving UCLA my first job was at SUNY-Old Westbury. And it was such a downer, intellectually. There was nothing happening at the school in political terms, and the leading faculty voices were soft Maoists. There was an unpleasant conflict at Old Westbury between the old-style liberals and the pseudo-radical Maoists, or what I called Mao-oids. There were only four or five of us in Sociology, the bulk of whom were liberals. Meanwhile, some of the faculty radicals were assigning Mao in their classes, including fields like literature, which I thought was bullshit. The Maoist presence was particularly strong during the late 1970s, and had faded by the early 1980s.

KW: *How did you end up in the Department of Political Science at CUNY-Brooklyn College?*

SF: It was a purely budgetary matter. I had applied for tenure at Brooklyn College in Sociology, and the vote in my department was unanimous. Only one person voted against me across the entire University. And then bingo, a budget crackdown was announced, which was common in the late seventies and early 1980s. The impact of the urban fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s lasted for many years.

I found myself in a kind of limbo and was given a temporary administrative position until the money ran out. The head of my administrative department was also a dean, and she lobbied the president, who told me, "I cannot give you tenure in Sociology, but there are two possibilities. One is that we could tenure you in Puerto Rican Studies and the other is that we could give you tenure in Political Science." I told the president, "look, there are two people without tenure in Puerto Rican Studies. If they place me in that program, I'm going to have at least two enemies from the outset." But I had good relations with the chair of the Political Science department, and that's how I ended up getting tenure in Political Science. But I had always been a political sociologist anyway.

KW: *Did the department improve while you were there?*

SF: Oh yes. It's not ideal in that there are several faculty lines that have been left unfilled for many years. But one reason why things have improved is that we started conducting national searches. As a result, we were able to recruit people like Janet Johnson, a Russian specialist from Indiana University, and Corey Robin, the political theorist, from Yale. With the shrinkage of the higher education market, we were in a position to hire people from the top places who had already published articles and so on. After all, when I got my job at UCLA, I hadn't even finished my dissertation.

BUILDING AN IDEOLOGICAL TENDENCY

KW: *Let me see if you accept my periodization of the Sam Farber story. In the 1950s, you become politically active, and in the 1960s and 1970s you become involved in party-building. From the 1980s onwards you remain politically active but building an organization is no longer your priority, and you write books and articles in large part to make sense of your experiences in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.*

SF: That's true, except the part about party-building. I was never the kind of person who thought in those terms. I played a role in organizations that had a party-building orientation, such as the IS, especially during its turn to agitation in 1975-76. I went

along with this turn but for different reasons from the group's leadership, who believed that working class radicalization was around the corner. I never accepted that perspective. But what I did like was that the turn meant that the organization was prepared to become more professional in the way it behaved. That I liked. I always hated the dilettantism that was often found in the ISC and the early IS.

As you will remember, I came from a petty bourgeois background and my attitude toward these questions was shaped by my background. I did not grow up in an intellectual's home. My parents were not intellectuals and they left school after eighth grade. They were very intelligent people, but they had a practical orientation that I admired. I could never stand people who did not take their commitments seriously. I never felt comfortable with a bohemian culture which said, today, tomorrow, what difference does it make? I understand, intellectually, that this culture was a reaction to the experiences of those who grew up in uptight suburban homes. My family had done well in life, but my parents worked seven days a week. I grew up in a world where if you said you were going to do something then you did it. I never objected if someone said, "I'm tied up that day." What I objected to was when someone said, "I'll do it" and then didn't.

It's fair, in retrospect, to say that I was involved in party-building, but that's not the way that I thought about it at the time. The way that I thought about it was that I was helping to build an ideological tendency. The issue of Cuba was very much on my mind. I was extremely unhappy with the way that the left in general responded to the problem of the lack of democracy in post-revolutionary Cuba, accompanied —in my mind—by semi-racist assumptions about people from the Third World and the idea that they were not capable of working within a small-d democratic system. I wanted to build an ideological tendency that could push back against these kinds of ideas.

Of course, recruiting members was a test of the political ideas. But I never believed that the left would soon be in a position to take power in the United States. To this day my focus is on building a radical pole that could aspire to ideological and political hegemony in the country—that's what should be on the short and middle range agenda. The good news is that today the conditions are much better in terms of building that radical pole than they were in 1958 when I first arrived in this country, notwithstanding Trump. Much better. In 1958, the Cold War was still going, even though McCarthyism was on the wane. The prospects for building a political tendency have improved significantly.

KW: ***I assume that your first book*** **[Revolution and Reaction in Cuba, 1933-1960]** ***received attention from beyond the IS milieu?***

SF: I think so. Not a lot of academics were writing about Cuba back then. The Cubans themselves had not yet built a Cuban scholarship on the revolution. They were in the beginning stages of doing so. When I received my PhD in 1969 there was very little scholarship on the topic, although that started to change in the 1970s. It was in the 1980s and 1990s that the field began to really take off.

KW: *If we include your book on Che Guevara, four of your books are on different aspects of Cuban history, while the other two are the outliers—one is on the early years of the Soviet Union*—**Before Stalinism**—*and the other is your book* **Social Decay and Transformation: A View from the Left.** *Taken as a whole, your books point in two directions. The books on Cuba are shaped by your interest in making sense of the world you grew up in and the importance of viewing the Cuban revolution in historical rather than polemical terms. Leftists sometimes tell the story of the Cuban revolution as if it was a fully formed Athena that sprang out of the head of Zeus.*

SF: Absolutely.

KW: *While the other two books are connected to your experiences with the ISC and the IS, and the US left in general.*

SF: *Before Stalinism* was definitely shaped by my experiences in the US, where I was exposed to a particular line about the Russian revolution. I don't know if I mentioned this, but when I was first around the Shachtmanites it was a moment of transition for the group. Shachtman was moving to the right, but at an uneven pace, and with some back and forth. It was not a unilinear process. In the case of Shachtman, I always wondered whether he was withholding from his followers how far to the right he had gone.

I'll give you an example. In 1961, I was close to finishing my undergraduate degree at the University of Chicago, and the YPSL convention was being held in Michigan. Before the convention there was an educational school that YPSL organized that was held at the University of Chicago. Since I was on a student visa I was not going to the convention, but I attended the school. Shachtman gave a long presentation on the Russian revolution, which was followed by a lengthy discussion period. There were about 80 people in the room. This was only a few months after the Bay of Pigs, which Shachtman supported. In the back of the room, this guy stands up and denounces Shachtman for his position on the invasion. That guy turned out to be Paul Feldman, whose wife Sandra Feldman many years later became president of the United Federation of Teachers. Feldman edited the Socialist Party's newspaper *New America* for many years. A year or two after that meeting, he became a strong supporter of Shachtman's, so he went from denouncing Shachtman's turn to the right to embracing it. At the same meeting, someone asked Shachtman about the

war in Vietnam, which was just starting to heat up. Interestingly, Shachtman at the time was unequivocal in calling for a complete withdrawal of US troops and military advisors.

This slow process of political transition was helpful to me in the sense that I was exposed to a wide range of voices. This was helpful in that it encouraged me to think for myself. There was Debbie Meier, who later became a famous educator, and who at the time was an important leader of the Socialist Party in Chicago and elsewhere. There was also Saul Mendelson, Velma Hill, Norman Hill, Joel Geier, Mike Parker, Joanne Landy, and others. This was the milieu in which I learned about Marxism, Stalinism, and the history of socialism.

KW: *It is worth noting that people like Julie Jacobson and Hal Draper never treated Lenin as an infallible prophet in the way that Tony Cliff did, or the orthodox Trotskyists for that matter.*

SF: I'm glad that you mentioned it. Have you seen Draper's book on *The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat'" from Marx to Lenin* (1987)? There he's very critical of Lenin. The fact is that the atmosphere in the Independent Socialist Clubs, and even the early International Socialists, was not particularly Trotskyist. For one thing, aside from a few leaders and some members, most members rarely spoke about the group's Trotskyist origins. It was in England where I learned about the history of Trotskyism. For example, I came across the Socialist Labour League (SLL), which was an awful group. I remember a meeting of members of the Labour Party's youth group at which a member of Cliff's group said that if Lenin and Trotsky could disagree about things so could we. A member of the SLL shouted, "That's a lie! Lenin and Trotsky never disagreed about anything!"

This was not the way that most members of the YPSL/SP and ISC I knew talked about these issues. In both Chicago and Berkeley, there was the sense that Trotsky and Lenin were important historical figures and our political ancestors of course, but there wasn't the emphasis on "revolutionary continuity" that there was with the Trotskyist groups. We didn't think of ourselves in that way.

KW: *Some reviewers seemed surprised by how critical you were in* **Before Stalinism** *of key aspects of Bolshevik practice.*

SF: Of course. My criticisms were intended to be sharp but comradely, but that's not how some reviewers responded. Someone like John Rees, who reviewed the book for the British SWP, seemed surprised by the fact that I dug up a lot of damning historical material about Kronstadt and showed how Trotsky's defense of the regime's repression made a number of false claims.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

KW: ***You have had experiences with various socialist organizations, from the ISC and YPSL, and the early IS in Britain, to the IS in the US both before and after the big 1973 split. You spoke more than once at the Socialism conferences that were organized by the late ISO, and presumably you have interacted with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). What are the lessons that you've learned? What are some of the best practices, as it were, and what do we now know to avoid?***

SF: Prompted by the dissolution of the ISO, I've recently crystalized my thinking about these issues. When I look back, I realize that I never liked many aspects of the Trotskyist approach to organization. I never considered myself a Trotskyist, although in a broad sense I suppose I could be described as such. George Orwell once said that there is a sense in which the term "Trotskyist" could be applied to anyone who was opposed to Stalinism from the left. And in that sense of course I am. But not in any strict sense. One of the things that I became more and more aware of was the awful transformation of the IS group in Britain, which went from being a serious group with a highly democratic internal culture to becoming quite antidemocratic.

I actually liked the IS group in Britain of the early sixties more than the Shachtmanites. I once mentioned this to Joanne Landy, and she was not at all happy about it. But the SR/IS in the Britain of the early sixties did not have anything resembling a star system, or the "heavies" as we used to call them in YPSL. The group had a very egalitarian culture. As I mentioned, I became quite close to Michael Kidron, in part because during my time in London I was living in a dormitory at LSE which was not too far from where Michael and Nina Kidron lived. Michael was a real mensch, and he immediately invited me to write for their journal [*International Socialism*] even though I was still relatively new to the movement. This was typical of the IS group at the time. Kidron in particular was very encouraging toward new writers, and he could be described as a "revolutionary revisionist" in the best sense. Once I had written several book reviews, he asked if I would be interested in writing a critical appraisal of Lenin's *State and Revolution*. I told him that I did not feel at all qualified. I'm not sure I would be qualified even today. But Mike wanted to challenge people—I was not the only one by any means.

Another key IS member at the time was Alasdair MacIntyre. He was teaching at Oxford but was also writing for the group's paper and even edited it for a while. Whenever he was in London, he would stay with the Kidrons, and I talked to him several times. He had a very sharp mind and was very accessible, even though he

was already a big name in moral philosophy. The first Socialist Review meeting I attended was a debate between MacIntyre and Cliff on Marxism and philosophy. MacIntyre just demolished him. Cliff stuck to Marx and Engels and had no idea about what philosophy, Marxist or otherwise, was about in 1961.

The culture of the group at the time was easygoing, unpretentious, and small-d democratic. But in the late sixties and early seventies it started to change, primarily because of Tony Cliff. When the group turned in a "Leninist" direction it was absolutely clear that Kidron (Cliff's brother-in-law) did not want to get involved. I did a speaking tour for the group in 1973 and these trends were already in evidence. For example, during the tour I met an up-and-coming leader named Sheila McGregor. I was shocked. She was very nice to me on a personal level and drove me around the north of England to speak at various branches, including several overwhelmingly working-class ones, but politically she was awful with an undemocratic Zinonievite version of Bolshevism. I wrote about my concerns about where the group was headed in a piece that has been republished on Ian Birchall's website, with an introduction by John Rudge.

Some of the same dynamics were evident in a milder form in the ISO, which in some ways was moving in the right direction before it pulled apart—more open to feminism, and more internally democratic, with a proper internal bulletin and so on. But it was too little, too late.

I've reached the conclusion that groups like the ISO, which insist on having party "lines" on every political question, are headed in the wrong political direction. I recently wrote an article for an online journal called *Spectre* (www.spectrejournal.com/). I was assigned to work with one of the editors, an African-American professor, and later found out—not from her—that she had been eased out of the ISO because she approved of the concept of "white privilege," a concept which, incidentally, I happen to object strongly to the way it has been politically used. If somebody can't be a member of your group for this sort of reason—if you insist on such narrow boundaries—then you are bound to have splits and expulsions, lots of them.

A classic example of this narrowness, in my view, was in 1976 inside the British SWP. Some SWP members favoured working with the Broad Left in the unions, while others wanted to build their own caucuses. That to me is something you should *expect* in a group that has a growing presence in the labour movement. It was a strategic disagreement, but the leadership treated it as if it were a matter of core principles. If you cannot tolerate these sorts of differences, then there are bound to be problems. And there were problems of this kind with the ISO.

I've reached the conclusion that this model does not work. I agree with the practice

of democratic centralism to the extent that if the majority arrives at a decision then the minority must respect that, support it in action or at most abstain. I'm not for forcing people to believe in things that they do not believe in. That's not the issue. The issue is what they say, and especially do, in public. If not, what's the point of having a democratic organization to begin with? In other words, if you win, the organization does what you like, but if you lose, you act against the group's decision anyway. If I win, I win. But if I lose, because I and my tendency can do whatever it wants, then I still win, anyway. So, again, what is then the point of obtaining a majority?

KW: ***But even in the case of relatively sane organizations, if you say that we're going to be the nucleus of a party that will someday help transform the entire planet, then the strengths and weaknesses of the leadership are liable to become way more significant than they should be. DSA, for all its flaws, is an organization of 80,000 or 90,000 people, which allows for multiple tendencies and provides a much larger pool from which to draw new leaders. It means that the shortcomings of a small circle of people is less likely to warp the group than is the case with organizations that are far smaller.***

SF: I'm not an expert on DSA, but I know something about it. It is definitely the case that the group has multiple tendencies—and that's not my problem with the organization. The problem—from what all sorts of people tell me—is that there is very low level of political discussion in DSA. Even more important is that they are so focused on the electoral sphere that when the Black Lives Matter movement emerged, DSA could not bring itself to seriously relate to it as an organization. Thousands of DSA members participated in the protests, but they did not follow an orientation set by the organization and thus had nothing to say about the issue as a group. DSA just sat on its butt. That failure does not have to do with the fact that the group has multiple tendencies, but that it has a social-democratic, electoral approach to politics. And that has consequences.

KW: ***I'm increasingly skeptical of the kind of "hard" rhetoric that the British IS adopted, for example, when it renamed itself the SWP in 1976-77.***

SF: As I said before, I would place a tremendous amount of the blame on Tony Cliff. He had a lot of virtues—he was a terrific public speaker and knew how to speak to ordinary people. He was also sincere in his approach—what he said was what he thought. The problem is with what he thought. He was fundamentally crude when it came to politics. He had a peasant-like homespun wisdom that was not an act.

He was also intellectually unscrupulous. I will give you an example. He was quite

aware of Hal Draper's fine article on Lenin and the myth of revolutionary defeatism. I remember talking to Cliff about the article, many years ago. Later on, Cliff wrote his four-volume book on Lenin. And he discusses the question of revolutionary defeatism but makes no reference to Draper's views. Even though they were part of the same general political tendency, he had no interest in mentioning Draper, let alone arguing with his views. It wasn't for lack of space! Instead of dealing with these serious issues, he wrote a book that essentially made the case that Cliff was Lenin's successor. It had more to do with issues inside the SWP rather than Lenin as a historical figure.

KW: *James Cannon had the same problem—this idea that revolutionary continuity is more important than historical accuracy. The idea that there is an unbroken thread of revolutionary leadership that spans history reflects an obsession with purity rather than confronting the actual conditions of the day.*

SF: I don't think it's a matter of purity but of arrogance and of an overwhelming political pretense with few concrete achievements to back it up.

KW: *That's fair.*

SOCIAL DECAY

KW: *My final questions have to do with your book on* **Social Decay and Transformation** *(2000), which is your least-reviewed book, and an outlier in terms of its focus. I just reread it, and I wondered if you pulled some of your punches. You only give a hint of how frustrating the postmodern turn must have been for you in the 1990s.*

SF: Yes. At some point in the 1980s the academic world became its own point of reference. The battles to be won were all in the academy. And my book was quite critical of this turn. The book only received a handful of reviews, and it was definitely out of step with the general drift of the left at the time.

KW: *At the heart of* **Social Decay and Transformation** *is the argument that we should be defending and building upon the radical Enlightenment tradition, with its emphasis on science, rationality, and freedom.*

SF: Absolutely. I wish had a stronger background in philosophy. I never actually took any courses in philosophy at the undergraduate or graduate level. I picked up bits and pieces, but I wish I had the kind of training that would allow me to take on someone like Michael Löwy, who makes the case for the romantic tradition as an alternative to the Enlightenment and its radical wing. I would love to be able to

offer a systematic critique of his approach on behalf of the left-wing of the Enlightenment. To some degree this reflects the influence of Alasdair MacIntyre on my thinking during his Marxist period. He wrote a wonderful chapter titled "Breaking the Chains of Reason" for E.P. Thompson's book *Out of Apathy* (1960), which identified some of the key conceptual problems that would plague the New Left. I was also influenced by Lukacs' *The Destruction of Reason* in spite of its awful Stalinist politics.