

Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home, the Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

In his comparative study of New Left armed struggle in the United States and Germany in the 1960s and 1970s, *Bringing the War Home, the Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*, Jeremy Varon sets an ambitious agenda for himself. First, he seeks to better understand the larger phenomenon of New Left armed struggle in advanced capitalist nations; second, he looks to discover what was really particular about these movements; third, he seeks to debunk explanations that root these armed struggle movements in distinctly American or German terms; finally, Varon attempts to understand “the origins, purpose and effects of political violence” and the broader significance that political violence has for contemporary social movements (4). In seriously examining the question of the left’s political violence without *a priori* judgments on the matter, Varon makes a valuable contribution to New Left historiography. Nevertheless, perhaps because his goals are so ambitious, Varon is only partially successful in his efforts. Particularly troubling is Varon’s inability to place the best known American armed struggle group, Weatherman, in its specific historical context.

Varon is most successful in introducing the Red Army Faction (RAF) and the German New Left to a wider audience of American readers and explaining how tightly bound the RAF was to recent German history. Growing up as the sons and daughters of men and women who had participated or collaborated in genocide, and who refused to speak of their Nazi history, German youth desperately attempted to distinguish themselves from their parents’ generation. That generation had been silent in the 1930s and the 1940s, and with America’s brutal war against Vietnam, it was silent again. Said one German advocate of armed struggle: Germans “should have been the first to start shouting about Vietnam. All the Germans, not merely a few leftists. They did nothing. Arguing didn’t move them, pamphlets didn’t convince them, they got used to broken windows.... So there came a point ... when something new had to be found” (34). Moreover, in taking up arms against the German State by attacking and killing Germany’s political and economic elite, many of whom were deeply implicated in the Third Reich, the RAF directly challenged the Nazi past. In short, Varon has convincingly shown how Germany’s recent history shaped the sixties generation of Germans, on both the left and right.

To be sure, understanding RAF and its relationship to the past in no way justifies RAF violence or suggests that it was particularly effective in transforming German social realities. On the contrary, Varon demonstrates that RAF’s violence was largely counterproductive: the German State suspended civil liberties in order to get at RAF, and the German public largely went along

with this, just as it had done in the past. RAF, it seems, was trapped by the past, and the violence of its practice may well have flowed from some deep recognition and denial of that fact.

One wishes that Varon had applied his insights on the relation between the German New Left and Germany's past to his analysis of Weatherman. If Weatherman and the American New Left's young activists did not have the Nazi history driving them and shaping their consciousness, they nonetheless bore the burden of hundreds of years of white and male supremacy. Weatherman activists, strove, by might and main, to overcome their past; but their frantic practice, particularly through the latter part of 1969 and into the winter of 1970, demonstrated that they too were trapped by their history. In place of an analysis rooting Weatherman in American history, and specifically, rooting Weatherman activists as young *white* people, Varon offers a more generalized understanding that misses the essence of Weatherman history.

For example, in his discussion of Weatherman and the anti-war movement, Varon hinges a good part of his discussion on the question of violence versus non-violence and argues that the totality of antiwar activity constrained the US government's hand in its prosecution of the Vietnam War. He suggests, therefore, that the anti-war movement's violence had real impact in slowing the War. This is an important point and hardly contestable. When radical activists destroyed hundreds of Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) buildings, conducted militant demonstrations against military and military-industrial recruiters, fought with police to free seized comrades, and took other forms of militant action, they undoubtedly contributed to a growing climate of instability in the United States. As Varon suggests, policymakers *did* fear this increasing instability and factored that fear into their calculations of what kinds of escalation they could successfully carry out in Vietnam. Thus, Varon implicitly defends or vindicates a portion of Weatherman's practice. Certainly, Varon's position here is an important one in the face of the predominant historiography of the era, which condemns anti-war violence out of hand.

Nevertheless, in evaluating Weatherman's significance to the anti-war movement, the question is not one of violence versus non-violence: it is about the nature of *Weatherman's* violence. We cannot look at that issue without examining a number of related questions: what did Weatherman's use of violence mean given its leadership over and destruction of the largest radical anti-war organization in the country, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)? What did it mean given that Weatherman developed its use of violence not as a complement to other forms of struggle, but in *opposition* to other forms of struggle? Or that Weatherman claimed that its violence derived from the demands of the Vietnamese or black revolutionaries? In this specific evaluation of Weatherman's violence, Varon's book falls short.

Varon largely accepts Weatherman's rationale that its violence flowed from

solidarity with Third World revolution. However, nowhere is it more clear that Weatherman's violence ran counter to Third World solidarity than in Weatherman's relation to the Vietnamese. Although Varon barely touches on this matter, it is important to briefly lay that relationship out. Anti-war activists, SDSers included, repeatedly met with the Vietnamese during the late-1960s. Moreover, the Vietnamese convened a particular meeting with the most radical wing of the anti-war movement, Weatherman included, in Havana in July 1969. As they had at all previous meetings with US anti-war activists, the Vietnamese urged SDSers to make Vietnam an issue again, to raise the slogan of "Immediate Withdrawal," and to use Vietnam as a means of exposing the character of American society. In other words, the Vietnamese looked to SDS to build a broad anti-war movement while simultaneously working to deepen that movement's understandings of the nature of the society waging that war. Weatherman leader Bernardine Dohrn's notes from that meeting encapsulated the Vietnamese line. Dohrn reported that the head of North Vietnam's delegation explicitly urged the radicals to "carefully study the situation;" and he also warned them against putting "forward a slogan which is too high for people," lest the radicals miss the "broadest possibility of unity" (Senate Judiciary Internal Security Subcommittee United States, "The Weather Underground," [Washington, DC, 1975], 143-6).

Weatherman returned from that meeting arguing, in the name of solidarity with the Vietnamese, the *exact opposite* of what the Vietnamese had urged on them. Thus, when the New Mobilization Committee Against the War asked Weatherman to cooperate in building the November 1969 Washington demonstration against the war, Weatherman leader Mark Rudd denounced the Immediate Withdrawal slogan as liberal and insisted instead that the demonstration organize to "Bring the War Home." After the November demonstration was over — it was the largest demonstration in the nation's history — Weatherman, which had led contingents trashing windows in Washington, ostentatiously declared that "THE WAR ISN'T THE ISSUE ANYMORE" — the issue was now "violence" (*Fire*, 21 November 1969). Weatherman thus carried its Vietcong banners and broke windows in the name of the Vietnamese, even as it deliberately ignored their actual message.

In a similar fashion, Weatherman justified its violence as supporting "black leadership." But the most significant black revolutionary organization of the day, the Black Panthers, denounced Weatherman for its violence and insisted that the white radicals take on a different task: winning the white working class to an anti-racist solidarity. So Weatherman's violence, justified in the name of supporting black and Third World revolutionary leadership, was not based in any real black or Vietnamese leadership. On the contrary, the black and Third World leadership that Weatherman followed was a leadership that Weatherman itself largely invented. If we want to understand Weatherman's politics, strate-

gy and use of violence, and, more importantly, the deeper sense of historical self that drove Weatherman, understanding this contradiction would be a good place to start. Unfortunately, *Bringing the War Home* does not make that effort.

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Julia E. Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

Inside the Cuban Revolution by Julia E. Sweig, senior fellow and deputy director of the Latin American program at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), is without a doubt a landmark in the historiography of the Cuban Revolution. The book is the first rigorous investigation of the immediate period before the revolution. As a staff member of the CFR, Sweig was granted unprecedented access to the classified records in the Cuban Council of State's Office of Historic Affairs — the only scholar inside or outside of Cuba allowed access to the complete collection of Fidel Castro's 26th of July movement's underground operatives.

To have access to first-hand sources — letters, documents written by the different actors involved, etc — allowed Sweig to undertake a fearless analysis of a crucial stage in Cuban history: the period preceding the taking of power by Fidel Castro, which covers the 15 months of the Cuban insurrection (early 1957 to mid-1958), when the urban underground leadership was the dominant force within the *26th of July Movement* and Castro did not yet have the political and military initiative.

Using these documents, Sweig argues that in its early days the revolution was influenced more by the Cuban middle class and less by *Fidel Castro* or *Ernesto 'Che' Guevara* than historians have suggested. She explores the complex and often contradictory relations between urban members of the *26th of July Movement (Llano)*, and its mountain-based guerrilla in the *Sierra Maestra (Sierra)*, effectively shattering one of the enduring myths about the Cuban Revolution, forged, in large part, by the official Cuban historiography. Its main author was no one less a figure than Guevara, whose account practically suggests that the Sierra guerrillas single-handedly defeated the Batista regime. Sweig, conversely, demonstrates the preponderant function played by the secret urban organization of the *26th of July* in the triumph of the revolution. Sweig's thesis has considerable implications, because it dismantles the myth on which Castrist ideology is founded: that the *Sierra Maestra* fighters, after conducting a guerrilla war supported by a rural base, achieved a firm military victory