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Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che

By Max Elbaum Verso, 370 pp., \$30

Landmark 1960s social-change groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) are widely remembered for their progressive impact upon American society. But the raft of overtly revolutionary political organizations that emerged in the wake of SDS's demise, such as the Revolutionary Union (RU) and the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) (CPML) probably ring few bells except among aging veterans of those groups.

Filling this memory void is Max Elbaum's impressive and thoughtful new book, *Revolution in the Air*. A longtime activist in what he calls the "New Communist Movement" (NCM), Elbaum is a trustworthy guide to left radicalism from the late 1960s into the early 1990s. The breadth of Elbaum's knowledge, and the depth of his familiarity with long-forgotten publications, marks this book as an absolutely first-rate work of political scholarship from which today's young activists can draw important--if negative--lessons.

The late-1960s--early-1970s emergence of these NCM groups resulted from a combination of at least three major influences, Elbaum explains. One was the growth of support within SDS for a tightly disciplined, Leninist-style revolutionary vanguard party, in stark contrast to the largely unstructured organizational style that had predominated among New Left student groups. A second influence was the Black Panther Party (BPP), founded in late 1966, for "the BPP's character as a disciplined, centrally led, cadre party," Elbaum writes, legitimized "the notion of a tight revolutionary party among young radicals." A third major factor was the political irrelevance of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), a moribund, Soviet-funded entity that had "failed to engage the new radical generation as a partner-in-struggle" while resolutely championing "Soviet actions that were backward if not indefensible."

In contrast to the CPUSA and the Soviet Union, the new, post-SDS revolutionary leftists looked to Mao Zedong's People's Republic of China as their international lodestar and embraced anti-imperialism, anti-racism, and the creation of cadre-staffed, working-class-oriented organizations as their defining commitments. Elbaum wants to rebut the belief that the post-1968 revolutionary left was entirely just a "silly or even pathological reaction to the upheavals of the sixties," and he instead stresses "the breadth and depth of grassroots enthusiasm for revolutionary politics that existed in 1968--1973."

Elbaum is most impressive when analyzing what doomed all of these Maoist organizations to relatively brief lives. Two problems predominated: a profound "misassessment of how ripe capitalism was for defeat" in the United States, and an utter lack of humility about each organization's ideological proclamations and prospects for movement leadership. The latter shortcoming was endemic to any self-declared vanguard party, and stood in sharp contrast to the remarkably successful grassroots organizing efforts that SNCC had mounted in African American communities across the Deep South in the early 1960s.

While Maoist cadre believed that it was up to party members to educate grassroots workers, SNCC's far more perceptive attitude was that movement cadre should encourage citizens to articulate their own needs and that they could learn as much or more from the people as the people could learn from them. As Elbaum notes with dismay about the new communists, "most of the movement gave little attention to--or actually opposed--the development of forms reflecting bottom-up initiative and working-class self-organization outside party control."

What's more, even within the NCM's most successful organizations, first the RU, and then CPML, "revolutionary zeal tended to enclose cadre in a self-contained and distorted world" that could not have been more different from what SNCC organizers had experienced in their group's prime or what the CPUSA had manifested during its heyday in the 1930s. Just as the CPUSA's undeviating loyalty to Moscow had rendered it irrelevant to 1960s leftists, the new Maoists' loyalty to China became highly problematic in the mid 1970s once the People's Republic moved beyond polemical criticism of the Soviet Union and actively allied itself with the Nixon administration against the USSR.

Yet international power politics were only one aspect of the movement's downfall. "The tendency of a movement disproportionately composed of individuals from the intelligentsia to lose its sense of proportion about theoretical differences and fall into self-destructive infighting" was equally deleterious, Elbaum concludes. Although the movement reached a numerical peak in 1973--74, soon thereafter the movement's "dogmatic tendencies . . . assumed hegemonic force." As even the movement's strongest groups undertook "a never-ending quest for orthodoxy and a constant suspicion of heresy," the energetically radical potential that the movement had exhibited in its earliest years calcified into political and organizational rigidity.

Between 1979 and 1981, the CPML, which had become internationally recognized as China's favorite American party (CPML chairman Mike Klonsky was repeatedly feted with state-dinner-level visits to Beijing), dissolved in a rapid series of factional splits and departures. Elbaum sadly relates the human and emotional toll exacted by the movement's implosion, as "many veterans experienced something resembling post-traumatic stress syndrome." For many, their bitterness was so profound that they "simply abandoned political work altogether."

Elbaum notes that for many Maoists, once their political organizations crumbled, they successfully re-entered "the better-off strata from which they had once defected." Some, like onetime CPML chairman Klonsky, now an education professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, have undeniably retained more than a modicum of progressive politics. However, other former top CPML ideologues nowadays include a millionaire venture capitalist who worked for

many years at the Blackstone Group and a management executive for a prominent Florida-based restaurant chain.

Revolution in the Air cogently narrates the history of a highly instructive failure. Max Elbaum readily admits that there is "no evidence that Marxism-Leninism's resurrection lies anywhere on the horizon" and acknowledges it is "extremely unlikely" that young people who become radicalized now will seek affirmative guidance from that all-but-vanished tradition. Yet in much the same way that SNCC's legacy can teach present-day progressive organizers how they should interact with others, the New Communist Movement's history is a powerful lesson in how not to pursue the progressive transformation of society.