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THE BROTHERHOOD OF SLEEPING CAR PORTERS

"A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed"
by David Barber, Reviews

2008

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Subject: FW: Meet David Barber and discuss his book, A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed

From: "Chude Allen" <chude.allen@ucsf.edu>

Date: Wed, July 9, 2008 11:27 am

To: "Robert" <rlallen@uclink.berkeley.edu>

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BobHere's Roxanne's email with meeting info (in case you know anyone students?- who might be interested) and the reviews. I thought Dad's response was excellent, especially to the snotty review contrastg SDS to Young Americans for Freedom.

Chude

Subject: Meet Davidarber and discuss his book, A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed
ello all,

I hope you will be able to participate in this discussion that Chude AllenJames Tracy, and I have put together to take advantage of vid Barber's brief presence in the Bay Area to visit family, and we thank him for being agreeable to the gathering. Please don't post on listservs, due to limited space, but do invite anyone I have missed, especially veterans of SDS and SNCC and those involved in the new SDS, and namely, Robert Allen, whose email I can't find.

Roxanne

Tel: 415-370-4996

Meet David Barber and discuss his book, A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed

5:30-8PM, Monday, 28 July 2008

1095 Market Street (at 7th St), 7th Floor (Civic Center BART stop)
San Francisco, CA

David Barber's book, A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed, is important reading if we are to learn from past movement experience. Barber is assistant professor of history at the University of Tennessee at Martin. His work has appeared in Journal of Social History, Left History, and Race Traitor. Even if you haven't read the book, you will be able to contribute to and benefit from the discussion. The online roundtable below critiquing the book provides substantial information about its thesis and argument.

Here's a brief description A hard Rain Fell, which is endorsed on the coverMark Rudd, David Roediger, and Robert Allen: "A study of the growth and demise of the most radical white student group of the sixties. By the spring of 1969, Students for a Democratic Society

(SDS) had reached its zenith as the largest, most radical movement of white youth in American history--a genuine New Left. Yet less than a year later, SDS splintered into warring factions and ceased to exist. SDS's development and its dissolution grew directly out of the organization's relations with the black freedom movement, the movement against the Vietnam War, and the newly emerging struggle for women's liberation. For a moment, young white people could comprehend their world in new and revolutionary ways. But New Leftists did not respond as a tabula rasa. On the contrary, these young people's consciousnesses, their culture, their identities had arisen out of a history which, for hundreds of years, had privileged white over black, men over women, and America over the rest of the world. Such a history could not help but distort the vision and practice of these activists, good intentions notwithstanding. A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed traces these activists in their relation to other movements and demonstrates that the New Left's dissolution flowed directly from SDS's failure to break with traditional American notions of race, sex, and empire."

History-1960s, a progressive listserv I am a member of, does periodic roundtables on books about the 1960s movements, most recently on David's book. Below, are the 4 critiques, (including mine--I was asked to write on SDS's failure to address gender) followed by David's response to us.

H-1960s-ers,

I am very pleased to announce, at long last, our latest roundtable book discussion, this time on David Barber's provocative new book on SDS, A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed. As you'll see from the comments from reviewers, Barber has a number of interesting things to say about the politics, race, and class of SDS.

My thanks to David for providing us with the basis for the discussion, and to a wonderful group of reviewers: David Farber, Jama Lazerow, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Peniel Joseph. I am sure there are others on the list who will be eager to jump into this discussion as well.

Edwin Martini, Moderator H-1960s
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H-1960s Roundtable

David Barber, A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why it Failed
Commentary by Jama Lazerow

A Hard Rain Fell has an arresting thesis: the young white New Left failed not because it followed the lead of the Black Power and other Third World revolutionary movements of the late 1960s, but because it didn't. In that, it failed not because it was too radical, but because it was too mainstream: a product of white middle-class America, it refused to abandon the privileges attendant to that status, which was the price of liberation in America. Moreover, the refusal can be traced back to the New Left's ³bronze age² of the early 1960s and, despite brief moments of transcendence along the way to its late sixties crack-up, the movement failed to confront its investment in the dominant culture's values, whether of race, class, gender, or nation. And, for that particular failure, the country

paid a steep price: the greatest challenge to racism, war, and inequality in the nation's history succumbed to the forces of reaction, at least in part because the white New Left didn't show up when it counted most.

This is not the first notice of the problem. Indeed, it was understood at the time, most particularly by those in the black liberation movement to whom New Leftists often pledged fealty. Barber quotes one of them, SNCC's Phil Hutchings, who wrote in a piece on black-white relations in the movement in early 1970:

Whites in the movement, and very especially males have been brought up and educated on the assumption that all problems can be solved (by them). Going to the better universities they have been trained to be part of the ruling elite. Once they become ³radicals² they put these elite skills and training to the use of the revolution without ever realizing how manipulatory and basic to the old system much of the past training is (222).

But, Barber's is the first sustained attempt by a professional historian to place this insight at the heart of an interpretation of the New Left from the Port Huron Statement to Kent State, by focusing on how the movement SDS in particular dealt with the black freedom struggle in its Black Power phase, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the emergence of women's liberation from within.[1]

As should be obvious, this is not Van Gosse's New Left, the ³movement of movements² defined not by race, ethnicity, gender, or age but by the commitment to radical democracy, not by the decade but by the broad sweep from the early 1950s well into the 1970s.[2] This is mostly the story of SDS in the mid-to-late 1960s. However, the book claims to break with an SDS-centered history of the sixties, which came under attack about a decade ago, by seeing this exemplar of the white New Left as the ³tail² of a ³storm of storms² whose eye was a world-wide upheaval of colonial peoples, with the black movement at the center of the storm in the US. He has, he says, written ³a history of a white group [without writing] a white-centered history² (14-15).[3] And so, by incorporating the key insight of the ³whiteness studies² historiography spearheaded by David Roediger and other historians of the 19th century (though without the weight of cultural studies jargon or the multi-tiered footnotes that characterize that literature), Barber continues the trend toward historicizing the sixties.[4]

Not that this is a detached or dispassionate analysis. Parts of the book are as harsh in condemning the New Left as one can find in some of the most critical volumes on the subject.[5] But, Barber's purpose is not to bury but to excavate. He makes clear at the outset that he is ³an interested party in this history² (ix), having been a sixties radical and his work often reads like an ³intervention,² to use the political vernacular of an earlier day. He is after the lessons this story of the New Left's failure teaches, because he clearly wishes it had succeeded in its revolutionary formulation.[6]

Thus, more than a quarter of the book focuses tightly on the year from the spring of 1969 to the spring of 1970, when revolution was in the air and which marked the ultimately fatal factional struggles within SDS just as it reached its peak the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) versus the Progressive Labor Party (PL), then the splitting of RYM into Weatherman and RYM II. Perhaps because of Barber's own experience as a Weatherman in New York, that group

receives the lion's share of attention. But it also offers the best example of his thesis. For that to work, however, the Weathermen, whose founding manifesto was titled, ³You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Winds Blows,² must be seen as something more than the way they are by most historians as merely an ³extremist splinter group,² as spoilers or by some at the time, who quipped, ³you don't need a proctologist to know who the assholes are.²[7] Barber claims they were in fact something more: they represented in many respects the fruit of the New Left tree, poisoned at birth.

In Barber's telling, a movement of white radicals catalyzed by the civil rights movement very early on assumed they would lead, especially as they imagined the black struggle to be about racism only, and thus merely one part of the larger movement for a democratic society. Here, he can point to statements by SDS leaders that in effect trivialized the black movement, even as they claimed to be supporting it, but his is a behavioral analysis. Indeed, the burden of the book is to demonstrate by an analysis of action (or inaction) that both the historians who condemn SDS for an uncritical Third Worldism and those who praise them for abandoning white skin privilege and following the leadership of colonial peoples abroad and at home have mistakenly taken the white radicals at their word. The historical record is different, according to Barber: though some individuals sometimes followed the leadership of black and Third World revolutionaries, and, more important, took seriously the call for whites to develop ³a new sense of self and a new sense of community,² the actions were few and were not sustained (17). New Left rhetoric was at radical odds with reality.

So, when SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael, in explaining the meaning of Black Power in 1966, called for whites to organize in their own communities to fight racism there, the SDS National Office immediately and unequivocally supported Black Power but had little concrete to say about how that support would manifest itself. Meanwhile, in the national SDS newsletter, New Left Notes, Staughton Lynd wrote that SNCC was saying, ³Blacks should be organized by blacks, and what white organizers do is something for white organizers to decide² (20). And, Lynd suggested, that should not be to become ³auxiliary to a radicalism [whose] center of gravity was in other people's lives² (20). That position, according to Barber, precisely missed the point indeed, represented a deliberate avoiding of the point: fighting racism among whites, among themselves, was not auxiliary but central to any revolution in a nation built on slavery and racism, and in a world whose revolutionary cutting edge was the nationalist aspirations of colonial peoples of color.

That avoidance a kind of great evasion characterized the way the New Left dealt with the great issues of the day: refusing the Black Panthers¹ request for help in promoting the Peace and Freedom Party; refusing the Vietnamese request for more educational efforts and more unity in the antiwar movement; refusing the requests of female New Leftists to confront male supremacy in the movement. There was always an excuse: electoral politics was reformist; ending the war required more militancy; gender struggles distracted from the principal struggle. The most extreme result of this kind of politics was Weatherman, who carried out actions in Chicago that were openly condemned by the Panthers there, just a few months after SDS had declared the Panthers the ³revolutionary vanguard,² and some of whose leaders later talked about targeted assassinations of well-known oppressors of black people in order to inspire a race war on their

behalf, of course. Barber calls it, elsewhere, ³leading the vanguard.²[8]

One might quibble with some of Barber's criticisms of SDS in its relations with the Panthers, which forms the heart of his 1969-70 story. For example, while SDS may have found the Panthers' call for community control of police, like its involvement in electoral politics, a reformist illusion, many in the leadership of SNCC found the Panthers' entire program reformist. And if SDS's resolution, ³The Black Panther Party: Toward the Liberation of the Colony,² which endorsed the Panthers as the vanguard party, constituted interference in the black movement, it was the kind of fealty the Panthers demanded of all its allies. For when Panthers intoned the phrase, ³we paid the cost to be the boss,² they meant not just black people but the Black Panther Party. Still, it is hard to argue with the evidence Barber has marshaled showing New Leftists repeatedly pledging support for the Panthers and then turning away at critical junctures.

More generally, in allowing us to see familiar things in unfamiliar ways The Port Huron Statement's ³We are the people of this generation looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit² as a statement of entitlement; Casey Hayden and Mary King's ³Women in the Movement² position paper as in part a protest against the rise of black nationalism in SNCC; the Marxist-Leninist vanguardism of PL, Weatherman, and RYM II as a measure of consensus in SDS Barber directs us back to the national story that was the focus of research and writing on the period in the late 20th century. But, what does his story look like if we move beyond New York, Chicago, and Oakland? The portrait of the Panthers in A Hard Rain Fell misses their multi-dimensionality: their sexual politics cannot be reduced to Elaine Brown's account of the Bay Area (165), which elides the very different story in places like Boston, where sexual relations were determined more by rank than by gender; their relations with Weatherman, and the question of armed struggle more generally (215, 256n59), was complex and divided at the local level (as it was, in fact, at the national level as well long before the 1971 split); their ideological stance was in a constant state of flux and cannot be reduced to the label ³black nationalist,² certainly not in 1969 (187). Similarly, we still know precious little about the actual relationships between New Leftists and the Panthers throughout this period at the local level.

These nuances may matter little to Barber's main point that SDS disappeared because of ³white arrogance² at the top. Still, if the white New Left was something more than the leaders of SDS some of whom kept copies of the letters they wrote to others in the evident belief that one day, naturally, someone would be interested in what they wrote if the life of a movement that involved tens of thousands in hundreds of schools and communities also helps explain its death, then the story from below should be taken into account. [9] For the excavation of that history, Barber has offered us a new set of questions for empirical research.

[1] Historians working on related sixties topics have remarked on what Barber finds here. Simon Hall, for example, notes the ³many ways the National Conference for New Politics [summer 1967] foretold the demise of a New Left that was increasingly alienated from mainstream politics, contemptuous of white liberals, and estranged from, while simultaneously attracted to, Black Power,² in his Peace and Freedom: The Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements in the 1960s

- (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 120.
- [2] Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretive History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
- [3] Andrew Hunt, ³Review Essay: *When Did the Sixties Happen?*¹ *Searching for New Directions*,² *Journal of Social History* 33 (Fall 1999): 147-61.
- [4] David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London and New York: Verso, 1991);
³Scholarly Controversy: Whiteness Studies and the Historians¹ *Imagination*,² *International Labor and Working Class History* No. 60 (Fall 2001).
- [5] E.g., William L. O'Neill, *The New Left: A History* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2001).
- [6] An early version of the argument can be found in his ³*A Fucking White Revolutionary Mass Movement*¹ and *Other Fables of Whiteness*,² *Race Traitor* No. 12 (Spring 2001): 4-90.
- [7] Mark Hamilton Lyle, *America's Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era From Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 344.
- [8] David Barber, ³*Leading the Vanguard: White New Leftists School the Panthers on Black Revolution*,² in Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, eds., *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 223-51.
- [9] See, for example, Todd Gitlin's memoir/history, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).

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H-1960s Roundtable

David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why it Failed* (Mississippi, 2008)

Commentary by Peniel Joseph

Popular and scholarly accounts of radical political activism of the 1960s commonly portray Black Power era as the darker side of civil rights, a movement comprised of gun-toting urban militants whose polemical fireworks made for good television but less than effective political organizing. Civil rights scholarship has contributed to this perception, especially in the case of numerous overviews and textbooks that continue to demonize Black Power as part of a declension narrative that points to 1968 as the year dreams of racial integration and social justice crashed on the craggy shore of racial division and urban rioting. But perhaps the most damning indictment of the Black Power era, and its most famous organization the Black Panthers, has come from histories of the New Left and memoirs of disillusioned ex-radicals. Todd Gitlin's widely read *The Sixties* extols this point of view, portraying the Black Panthers as caricatures out of a B movie who white radicals followed into the abyss of ideological sectarianism and fantasies of revolutionary violence. In this reading of history the Students for a Democratic Society in their eagerness to mimic the Panthers' revolutionary posturing unwitting helped to unleash the specter of identity politics onto America and in the process sowed the seeds of their organizational undoing. David Barber's new analytical history *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed*, challenges these long held assumptions and in the process offers a thoughtful and provocative account of the New Left's relationship to Black Power.

Black Power fundamentally altered the New Left's conceptions of racial identity argues Barber, by calling for a redefinition of black identity and in the process forcing white activists to at least superficially confront normative dimensions of white privilege and power. Initially, SDS's response to Black Power seemed promising. The national organization issued a supportive statement and no less than three SDS chapters sponsored ³Black Power² days in October 1966. The most famous of these took place in Berkeley and featured Black Power spokesman Stokely Carmichael who galvanized the largely white crowd in attendance with a wide ranging speech that criticized the Vietnam War, distilled the contradictions of American democracy, and repudiated white racism.

Yet SDS continued to operate under its standard set of organizing assumptions, which included the belief, despite contrary evidence, that the group represented the center of movements for social change in America. From this perspective SDS failed to interpret Carmichael's call for whites to organize in white communities as the anti-racist imperative that it was. Instead, the group's relatively few efforts to organize white communities shied away from the tedious work of anti-racist community organizing in favor of a more ³universal² focus on class.

Massive racial unrest during the summer of 1967 again forced SDS to confront the politics of Black Power. Yet, although urban rebellions that year ³deeply affected white New Leftists, the greater part of the New Left took from that summer not the demands of the black movement but the black movement's militancy.² (Barber, p. 36). On this score white antiwar activists escalated their tactics to include strategic confrontations with law enforcement and the destruction of private property.

By 1968 the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., government repression against Black Power activists, the rise of the Black Panthers, and black student protests across the nation forced SDS to confront its relationship to the African American freedom struggle. Once again SDS responded with rhetorical eloquence (in the form of a March 1968 declaration that offered a nuance analysis of racism) and tactical lethargy. For Barber, the organization's inability to apply the valuable intellectual legacy of the Black Power Movement led it down a path of aping the movement's militancy at the expense of its complex ideas about power, culture, privilege, and racial and economic justice. Nowhere was this more evident than in SDS's refusal to Panther overtures to form an alliance with the Peace and Freedom Party. In rejecting the Panthers, SDS ratcheted up their own revolutionary rhetoric, consistently laying claim to being the center of social transformation in American politics even as their unacknowledged racism insulated them from a deeper participation in the era's struggles and upheavals.

By taking Black Power era radicalism seriously, Barber's book offers an important contribution to new histories of the 1960s, the New Left, and the black freedom struggle. Barber's willingness to critically assess the strains of white racism that accompanied SDS's efforts to transform American is particularly refreshing.

A Hard Rain Fell's concept of the Black Power Movement is, at times, too limited. While anti-colonialism and self-determination were certainly a part of this movement, Black Power was not limited to these concepts. Indeed, Black Power activists attempted to fundamentally redefine American democracy at the local, national, and international level. African Americans participated in the Black Power era at the local level through countless community groups, black student unions, anti-poverty efforts, and cultural centers than through more well-known organizations such as the Black Panthers and SNCC. Moreover, it is important to remember that

Stokely Carmichael, widely acknowledged as the movement's chief spokesman, gave form (and not substance) to a preexisting movement that paralleled and intersected with the activism that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement's heroic period. Between 1954 and 1965 Malcolm X served as the national leader and international icon of a movement for social, political, and economic self-determination that represented the early stages of the modern Black Power era. In a very real sense then, Carmichael, along with the Black Panther and other organizations, joined the movement midstream and gave shape and substance to its high point in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Ultimately, Barber's study is to be commended for its rigorously analytical approach to challenging the conventional wisdom that decries Black Power as infantile Leftism of the 1960s. By taking the movement's ideas seriously, Barber offers up another and much needed avenue for historical and scholarly reconsideration of the social movements of the 1960s. Authored by a former SDS member, *A Hard Rain Fell* also offers an antidote to the string of memoirs and histories by disgruntled ex-radicals who lay the blame for the group's failures squarely on the shoulders of rough-hewn Black Panthers and other assorted Black Power militants. In doing so, Barber's study deserves a wide audience.

H-1960s Roundtable

David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why it Failed* (Mississippi, 2008)

Commentary by David Farber

In *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why it Failed*, David Barber offers a new explanation for what he calls the failure of the New Left. By failure I think Professor Barber means something different than the word might denote in normative political terms. In other words he is not, I think, trying to explain why SDS, the flagship organization of the white New Left in the 1960s, failed to gain sufficient power to influence political developments in the United States but instead imploded. If I understand him right, he is much more invested in explaining the failure of the New Left in more ideological terms, arguing that the New Left failed when it betrayed what he believes to be the core principal of any legitimate American Left movement. Barber argues that "the New Left failed not because it radically separated itself from America's mainstream, the claim of a number of important historians of the period. Rather, it failed because it came to mirror that mainstream, and in mirroring traditional American racial attitudes, it ceased to represent a Left" (8). Specifically, he argues that SDS failed (and I am not positive here if he means lost sufficient membership and support to be a viable national force or if he means lost its key Left ideological credential and thus was not even really a Left organization) in large part because it refused to subordinate itself to radical black nationalists. He writes: "the New Left failed not because it was too radical in its support of the black nationalist movement but because it was not radical enough" (15). He underlines this point several times in the text, castigating the Weatherman, in particular, for not recognizing the revolutionary leadership of the Black Panther Party, "the most important black nationalist organization in the United States" (215). Barber makes this claim immediately after quoting from an article written by Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver in which Cleaver praises Weatherman for having paralyzed a "pig" during its recent Chicago action and reminding his fellow revolutionaries that "a determined revolutionary doesn't require an authorization from a Central Committee before offing a pig" (215). What exactly is Barber wishing for the New Left? The way Barber formulates his scholarly argument makes it hard to refute. For

those not already convinced by his premise about the specific meaning of the Left in America it is, however, relatively easy to dismiss.

So I ask: Professor Barber, do you mean that if only SDS had more aggressively accepted the leadership, goals and ideology of the Black nationalist movement it would have become a much more influential force in American political life? Or do you mean that if SDS had only more aggressively accepted the leadership, goals, and ideology of the Black nationalist movement it would have provided the Left with a valuable ideological paradigm, even if that paradigm did not win it much support from the American people? I am also not sure, Professor Barber, who you see as the New Left's primary audience and what you see as its primary purpose. Is its goal to mobilize the American people, in general? Or do you believe that the New Left--as a small, even tiny, group of white radicals--should have aligned itself with Third World people or with specific international radical organizations or with people of color generally or perhaps with some other political force?

As Barber tells us, factions of white radicals did seek such alliances in the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s; he argues, however, that those attempts were insufficiently wholehearted, almost always because whites failed to really give up their white skin privileges, as some white radicals themselves bemoaned at the time.

In a different vein, I am also curious what Professor Barber makes of Van Gosse's cogent arguments about the breadth and general character of the New Left in the United States and its durability into the 1970s. SDS did fail but the new democratic practices and purposes of the New Left, via new organizational forms and causes, continued to forge substantial changes in the United States. To repeat myself, ³failure² is a term that needs explaining. Similarly, I wonder if Barber would extend his argument about why SDS ³fell² to the failures of the Black Panthers and other key factions of the black nationalist movement such as the Black Liberation Army was their major problem, too, that they were ³not radical enough² in adhering to or advancing the black nationalist cause? Is it possible that the black nationalist model, especially in its most militant and radical forms, was not the right political model for the Left in the Sixties era?

In general, *A Hard Rain Fell* makes a lot of big claims about the meaning of race and the utility of Black nationalism in the making and unmaking of the New Left in America that are difficult to assess, especially as Professor Barber rarely provides evidence to support them. For example, Barber asserts that for ³white youth,² ³the struggle for authenticity, at its root, was simply the struggle to comprehend and purge themselves of the lie of whiteness² (8). Whenever an author tells me that for an entire demographic group something complex, multidimensional and historically contingent is ³simply² one thing, I have to wonder about the statement's accuracy. Later, he states simply states ³Indeed, slavery and racism had created the white woman in all her most essential characteristics: as the model of beauty, as socially isolated and dependent upon men for protection, and as passive politically, intellectually, and sexually. . . . In this sense, the struggle for white women's liberation also ran through the anti-imperialist and antiracist struggle² (128). I understand that Barber is implicitly arguing that American ³white women² is a specific category or identity different from other kinds of ³women,² but his all encompassing equation of racialization to gender formation seems to be needlessly reductionist. Such unsubstantiated claims constantly interrupt the text, creating a polemical tone that makes it less useful as a history--though perhaps more stimulating as a work of political theory. And, I repeat, I think Barber is much more interested in

making the case that the Left should have adopted a more rigorously and militantly racialized ideology, as offered by key Black nationalists, than he is in arguing with, say, Todd Gitlin about why SDS failed to become a powerful organization in American politics in the post-sixties era.

Before moving forward, I have to admit that in my own work I have been thinking about the New Left differently as a result of my current project on the rise and fall of modern political conservatism. SDS and Young Americans for Freedom began at almost the exact same historical moment. SDS, after a brief flirtation with the Democratic Party and organized labor, turned away from institutional affiliations with the existing left/liberal political bloc. The YAF went in the other direction as its members worked with the right wing of the Republican Party as well as with William Buckley and the intellectuals attuned to the National Review. The YAF became a vital part of a multi-constituent conservative movement and many of its members became highly influential life-long activists in the successful Right Wing movement of the last half century. The success of the YAF in contributing to a powerful Right-Wing movement in the United States would seemingly give some credibility to the argument that Maurice Isserman, Todd Gitlin and others have made that the specific failure of SDS might be linked more to its most influential members' failures to understand their political moment and the culture of democratic politics in the United States than it does to SDS's white members' inability to rid themselves of their racism and the lie of whiteness,² and, instead, to acknowledge the ideological insights and leadership of Black nationalists. Though, again, I fear that my aside here is really not relevant to Professor Barber's concerns, which I believe are less about political power and social change than about what he believes are the appropriate underpinnings of a genuine American Left.

HARD RAIN FELL: SDS AND WHY IT FAILED by David Barber
Commentary by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

David Barber's *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed* had a profound effect on me and my thinking about, not only SDS, but also the other social movements of the period. Due to Barber's clear and elegant writing style, his analysis comes through strongly and persuasively, giving a fresh take on what had before been two official narratives, one from the left, and one from the right, with slight variations in nuances. Reading this week Carl Oglesby's memoir of SDS, *Ravens in the Storm*, as well as a new interview with George Katsiaficas ("*Remembering May '68*" in *Upping the Anti: A Journal of Theory and Action*. 6), I became aware that I would have read these texts quite differently had I read them before *A Hard Rain Fell*. I found myself applying Barber's critique, engaging with the material, drawing out theoretical assumptions. I hope this book will be read widely both by Sixties New Left veterans, as well as younger activists. I think it has the potential to take the level of discussion about the Sixties and the New Left to another, very different level.

Barber concludes: "SDS failed. The white New Left failed." It failed, he argues, because SDS was made up of young people who were heirs to privilege--white over black, men over women, and the United States over the rest of the world. He tackles these "three pillars of failure" in the first three chapters of the book, documenting SDS's slide into doom, from the Port Huron statement in 1962 to its attack on the emerging Women's Liberation Movement in 1969. The final two chapters deal with the dissolution, factionalization, and, especially, the "Action Faction," that became Weatherman. I believe that Barber's insistence on SDS's failure,

whether one agrees or not with that conclusion, provides him, and the reader, with a perspective that is much needed.

Because my own involvement in the New Left in the mid-1960s led me to participate in jump-starting "radical feminism," as Barber terms what we then called the women's liberation movement, I want to comment primarily on Chapter 3, "The New Left and Feminism, 1965-1969," and then add some general observations.

Throughout the book, Barber exhibits a grasp of his material that is truly profound. In Chapter 3, he is greatly aided by three outstanding historical studies: Sara Evans, *Personal Politics*, Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, and Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, as well as an interview with the co-founder of New York Radical Women, Pam "Chude" Allen. However, he uses the scholarly sources critically. He states: "Historians of the New Left and the feminist movement generally attribute the emergence of a radical women's movement to the work of white women, largely southern, in the southern civil rights struggle of the early and mid-1960s," and comments that "from the start, white female radicals, like their radical white male counterparts, had great difficulty maintaining a consistent hold of race as a social construction."² (96)

The New Left, Barber argues, used women's liberation as a foil to prove their own purity in racial politics by accusing women's liberation of racism. He claims that in doing so, the New Left actually strengthened the women's liberation movement's tendency to forego all struggles except for women's liberation. In the parlance of the time, they refused to fight "other peoples" battles or only being in solidarity, or as auxiliary to the Black movement. (96) Therefore, Barber perceptively observes, during the period, 1965-69, radical women broke with the New Left by defining and attacking male supremacy, but it was a white critique. They did break with the New Left, he writes, but their path ran parallel to the New Left path. (95)

Barber is correct in pointing out that women's liberation essentialists, such as Judith Brown and Beverly Jones, and especially Robin Morgan in her 1970 essay, "Good-bye to all That," accepted the New Left's claims that they were battling the more important issues of racism, imperialism, and class oppression: "She bade farewell to the New Left's organizational embodiments, and to its continued male-supremacist ideology and practice, even as she uncritically accepted the New Left's claims about itself. Weatherman, RYNMII, and the various Old Left and pacifist stripes Morgan condemned so forcefully justified not dealing with their male supremacy in the name of battling some 'greater' oppression—racism, imperialism, class oppression. Morgan, instead of seeing that the New Left, in fact, was as little challenging its own racism as it was challenging its own male supremacy, accepted these claims. The upshot of accepting these claims was to draw this conclusion: if battling racial or class or imperial oppressions stood as an obstacle to battling women's oppression, this affirmed that women's oppression transcended these other oppressions. As a transcendent oppression, women's oppression was primary and would have to be taken on before taking on racism, imperialism, and class oppression." In short, Morgan's whiteness, the presumption that her vision was the clearest, continued to link her with the New Left, her "good-bye," notwithstanding.² (203)

Those of us who at that time were strong feminists but not about to abandon the struggle against imperialism, racism, and capitalism, lost in our resistance to this kind of dogma, some of us then swerving toward Marxist-Leninist sects, with negative results, as Barber recounts my encounter with Avakian's Revolutionary Union. (199-200)

What's missing in this chapter and throughout the book is the class composition and absence of class consciousness of the New Left, including the Women's Liberation Movement. Barber, following Sara Evans important insight that radical feminism emerged from young white women working in Civil Rights projects in the South, writes that: "Young white women activists glimpsed something beyond racism's virulence. They also glimpsed the vitality and strength of the black community. Most particularly, they saw black women playing far different roles in the black community than the roles that white women played in white American society." (96-97)

But, in seeing this, these white women were seeing race as the defining factor rather than class. As one who grew up rural and working class (part Indian, but in the white working class world) in Oklahoma, I embraced feminism in 1963 after reading de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which actually led me to anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist activism (within a year, I was a member of the first U.S. campus-based anti-apartheid group, at UCLA). It did not take long for me to find New Left men grossly male supremacist, becoming unbearable in the summer of 1967 in London while working with the ANC and the London anti-apartheid solidarity movement. I vowed to return to the U.S. and help start a women's liberation movement to make the men change, so that a revolution would be possible with the defeat of patriarchy. I acutely felt my own potential as an effective revolutionary stifled. I moved to the center of radical activity, the northeastern corridor (living in Cambridge, but with much travel to New York and Washington) and connected with hundreds of what I thought were like minded women.

However, soon I felt the same stifling from them that I had felt from New Left men. I realized that the absence of class consciousness was the fatal flaw of the New Left, and anti-racism actually was a vehicle of privilege. I found many of the women's liberation activists downright racist. I also became aware that the experience these now feminist women had gained in the southern Civil Rights Movement was based on a class privilege that I could not even imagine. But, if one raised the question of class among New Left women, one was accused of being Marxist or "thinking like a man." Of course, as Barber points out, the vulgar Marxists used class as a weapon to denounce Black Power and women's liberation, even the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. (28)

Barber notes that anti-imperialism didn't automatically lead to class analysis of U.S. society, and that the New Left was unable to synchronize the inside/outside, in that it was clear that capitalism was the basis of anti-imperialism, but what did that mean about class in the U.S? (p. 10) He doesn't incorporate this theme into his analysis. He does a good job in Chapter 1, criticizing the fallacies of both SDS's ERAP with its goal of an "interracial movement of the poor," as well as Progressive Labor Party and other Marxists that regarded racism as "false consciousness" in white workers, and "sexism" as a secondary concern for all workers. Barber refers to the New Left as middle class and white, but doesn't deal with the New Left not even attempting to come to grips with class consciousness and privilege.

Yet, it almost seems that Barber is implying that "identity politics" was really a creation of the New Left, not of Black Nationalism? In refusing to accept a century or more of developing African-American analysis of the United States, the New Left (including the women's liberation movement) ghettoized Black nationalism as narrow, based on identity. At any rate, without centering class privilege, this was the result. In limiting the "three pillars of failure" of SDS to white over black, men over women, and the United States over the rest of the

✓
"students"
instead

world, Barber has assumed that white encompasses class, and it does not. ✓

But there is also the question of the official story of the Civil Rights Movement, including class composition and consciousness, which Barber doesn't critique. He sees the New Left as growing out of the African-American led Civil Rights movement, particularly the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Following the Movement's great victory in ending legal segregation, reflected in the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the radical thrust of the African-American movement became (inexplicably) nationalist. SNCC, like SDS, also ceased to exist in 1968, splintering into factions, some of which turned to violence and the underground like Weather. I think it's too simple to simply insist, as Barber does, that SDS did not follow the direction of the Black Power movement.

Barber's in-depth probing of the white privilege that prevailed in SDS and the New Left, including the women's liberation movement, raised for me another consideration that he does not deal with directly. Although in Chapter 2, "The New Left and the American Empire, 1962-1968," he brilliantly discusses the New Left's "discovery" of and outrage about U.S. imperialism, particularly the contributions of Carl Oglesby, he does not discuss, or perhaps perceive, the extensive and continuing effect the New Left had on historical revisionism that fortified U.S. nationalism. In developing "people's history," and social history, a nation of immigrants, they created heroic stories of ordinary people, avoiding the history of the state as a colonizing regime, not a liberated colony, focusing on the system of slavery rather than colonialism as the origin of white supremacy.

Finally, it seems to me that even this fine piece of work, which *A Hard Rain Fell* certainly is, doesn't entirely de-link the assertion of the centrality of white radicals. Barber sees tragedy in the refusal or inability of SDS to simply follow direction from the Black movement, from the Vietnamese, and to welcome the liberation of women activists, implying that everything would have been different, the world would be different now. But, how could SDS have done that, with its class composition and total lack of class consciousness? In Oklahoma, we call this trying to "get blood out of a turnip," this mourning of SDS's inability to put its ideals into practice.

H-1960s Roundtable

David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell, SDS and Why It Failed* (Mississippi, 2008)

Author's Response, David Barber

I set out to write a history of SDS whose basic premise was that SDS was an organization of young white people. When I say that SDS was an organization of young white people I am saying that these were young people whose identities had been forged by a particular culture and a particular history: it was the culture and history of a nation founded and built on white supremacy, male supremacy, and the right of this country to conquer any people who stood in its way. Certainly, the United States was not unique in this history, nor are these factors white and male supremacy, American empire the sole factors shaping American identity. But to a greater degree than any other nation, the United States developed, and had to develop in particularly sharp fashion the central element of its history and culture white supremacy. White Americans forced African Americans to bow down before them on a daily basis for 300 years, all the while insisting that African Americans appear happy while so doing. It is difficult then to imagine this white supremacy not shaping the lives

and consciousness of the young people who would found, lead, and become members of SDS. In broad terms, this was the most important element of my project: to show dominant white American culture white supremacy as a determining factor in SDS's trajectory through the 60s.

J. P. [unclear]
America's white supremacy has taken and takes a variety of forms, hard and soft. Various combinations of these forms of white supremacy have dominated the consciousness of even the ³friends of the Negro.² Robert Allen's classic *Reluctant Reformers* is the preeminent historical work demonstrating how white supremacy has shaped white social reform movements in the US, including those movements which overtly expressed some kind of sympathy with the black plight. For example, as Allen, and also Leon Litwack, have affirmed, elements of white supremacist thinking permeated even the abolitionist movement. That white supremacy played some significant role in the New Left's history must also be the case, if past history, and the era in which the New Left arose, are any guide to the understanding here. Yet no historians have even attempted to understand white supremacy as any kind of factor in the New Left's history.

A few authors, Charles Payne, most notably, have written histories of the civil rights movement showing the relationship between his protagonists, young black people, and the African American culture from which they sprang. James Baldwin, too, has written quite movingly of this relationship. This is a goal I set myself in examining the struggle of white youth in the 1960s seeing the relationship young SDSers bore to the culture which produced them. As an author making a first real stab at this problem, I expect that I will be proven wrong to one degree or another in my assessments of any number of specific elements in this history. I am certainly deficient in my knowledge of all the movements I address in my book: we have far more raw data, memoirs, and scholarly appraisals on any one of these movements than a single individual could ³consume² in many years, and I had to focus in on those sources of information I deemed most relevant to my project. In the process I undoubtedly missed out on information and analysis that would have altered my work in significant ways. In their extremely generous reviews Jama Lazerow, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Peniel Joseph all highlight significant areas where my book falls short: its top down perspective, its failure to define class, and its failure to appreciate the complexities of Black Power in its manifestations and in its meanings.

More of a surprise to me, I found that I was not emotionally prepared to write this book. I struggled with tone throughout. My wife, Lisa, suggested that I scratch out all sarcasm a nasty homage to Revolutionary Union Chairman, Bob Avakian, for example, or a passing shot at Todd Gitlin and I refused, absolutely. On the other hand, when Seetha Srinivasan, the recently retired editor over at the University Press of Mississippi, strongly encouraged me to dispense with the sarcasm, I immediately set to work with my find command and pulled out all the nasty asides. Unfortunately, I still felt sarcastic, angry, and betrayed by the people whose story I was telling. Then David Roediger, reading for the press, suggested that I might be more generous with the New Left. Slowly it dawned on me that perhaps it was not only my subjects who had a problem. I aspired to writing a book that would make people cry. Because the story of the social movements of the sixties their rise, their incredible growth, the sense they imparted that we could build a really just world, and finally, the catastrophic defeat these

movements suffered this story is a tragedy. But my book's final form, although shorn of all external traces of anger, nonetheless reflected the anger in me, rather than the tremendous sadness of the story I was telling.

Despite failing to reconcile my conflicted feelings about the era prior to Hard Rain's publication, it's gratifying to me that Jama, Roxanne, and Peniel all believe that Hard Rain makes an important contribution to New Left historiography and deserves a wide audience. It may not be the definitive history of SDS which I would have liked it to have been, but when and if that book does come round, I am certain that it will share with Hard Rain two of my central theses: first, that the contradiction between dominant white culture, on the one hand, and SDS's efforts at solidarity with the worldwide anti-colonial revolution abroad and the black revolution at home, on the other, defined the New Left's trajectory through the 1960s. And, second, that the black revolution's defeat, at the end of the sixties, set the stage for dominant white culture's triumph in the consciousness of white radicals at the time.

I am indebted to Jama Lazerow for his very close reading, faithful articulation of, and thoughtful comments on my main arguments. I agree with Jama that my critique of the white New Left is not original, but reflects criticisms that black activists made of white activists back in the sixties. In addition to Phil Hutchings, whom Jama names as one of these black voices, I specifically cite at least half-a-dozen black activists from at least three different organizations all insisting that the white New Left's problem was that it was white, and this, of course, in a cultural sense, not in a racial sense. SNCC as an organization expressed this criticism directly, asking long time white comrades to leave. Indeed, SNCC considered the Panthers reformist in part because the Panthers were willing to work with white activists, if my memory serves me correctly. James Baldwin, who was my strongest guide to the sixties, explains this as well: white people, said Baldwin, "even the very best of white America" did not and could not for their upbringing and experience see the United States with the same clarity as could black people (208). Moreover, it was Baldwin who insisted that "those centuries of oppression are also the history of a system of thought" (228). However, as Jama also notes, if mine is not an original critique, it is nevertheless the first time that an historian has taken white American culture white supremacy and tried to understand the white New Left's history as the product, in part, of that culture. Numbers of historians have looked at how white supremacy has shaped earlier aspects of American history and I appreciate that Jama rightly places my work in with what they've done.

I wish that I had time to comment on all of the issues that Jama raises in his roundtable piece but for the sake of time and space, I can only address what I see as Jama's major criticism. Jama criticizes my book for avoiding the complexities and ambiguities within the Panther Party and within the black freedom movement, more generally. This is a point that Peniel Joseph makes also. I think, frankly, to answer both of them, that I shied away from going more deeply into the internal workings of the black movement for fear that it would be more complex than I could successfully negotiate in this book. I now realize that this was a false fear and had I faced it I would have had a stronger book. I suspect, for example, that Jama is correct on insisting that in its relations with Weatherman and in its attitude toward armed struggle, the Panthers were more divided than I

acknowledge in Hard Rain, although these divisions were principally at the local level, and were in any case secondary to Weatherman's thinking at the time. Readers will have to decide for themselves whether this flaw undermines my argument. I am confident, however, that my argument still holds. Weatherman did what it did in Chicago, for example, not because of the black revolution, but really, at the time, in spite of the black movement, and the Puerto Rican movement, too. Weatherman might have been acting at the time in the hopes of stimulating the growth of an armed struggle tendency in the black movement, but it was certainly not acting at the behest of such a tendency. Meanwhile, the Panthers' official national position in the summer and fall of 1969 was mass organizing work for black and white activists through its United Front Against Fascism (UFAF) program. This program would have required SDS and its Weatherman leadership to take the question of solidarity with the black movement into white communities in the United States. Both Weatherman and its RYM II ideological rival rejected UFAF, publicly, and in SDS's name. Moreover, rejecting UFAF continued SDS's history of avoiding the difficult work that SNCC had demanded of white activists at least as early as 1966: go into your own white communities and organize those communities against racism. Malcolm, too, in his autobiography, made this same demand on white activists. I am saying that whatever divisions may have existed within the Panthers and between the Panthers and other black liberation groups, SDS still had rejected this most consistent demand that black activists had raised to white activists. I think, too, that this demand was consistent over a number of years and sponsors for very real reasons: it resolved an important problem in the relations between black and white activists and created the possibility for black and white to work together under new terms in which the white experience did not dominate or overly influence the black struggle's character.

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I also concur with Jama that my story is principally SDS from the national perspective. As Jama suggests, it would be very productive to look at this story from the local perspective, asking of the local story the same kind of questions I ask of the national story.

I thank Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz for her generous assessment of my book. Together with Jama, Roxanne places my book in opposition to the ³two official narratives² of the white New Left's history: both liberal and radical histories (and memoirs) have taken SDS at its word, the former camp condemning SDSers for their allegiance to black radicals, and the latter, increasingly numerous, saluting SDSers for this same reason. Both these official narratives fail, however, if we measure SDS's allegiance to black radicals on the basis of their deeds, rather than their words. Roxanne also encapsulates my main argument well with her phrase, the ³three pillars of failure²: white over black, men over women, and the United States over the rest of the world.

Roxanne places my work on the women's movement and on SDS's male supremacy in the line started by Sara Evans and continued by Alice Echols and Ruth Rosen. Evans, in particular, was an important guide to the origins of the early women's liberation movement. In my opinion she offers one of the very finest descriptions of the impact the black freedom movement had upon young white activists, a description unmatched in the literature of the New Left. I lean heavily on Evans in my third chapter on the women's movement and SDS. On the other hand, I believe I go beyond Evans in two respects: first, and as Roxanne notes, I demonstrate how SDS's refusal to take

on male supremacy reinforced the women's movement's ³white² tendency, that is, its ³tendency to forego all struggles except for women's liberation.² My discussions with Chude Allen, also noted by Roxanne, were key to my understanding this element of the story. Secondly, I also sharpen Evans observation on the King-Hayden ³Kind of a Memo² paper. Evans simply notes that the black women who received the memo, and refused to respond to it, were on ³a different historical trajectory² than were Hayden and King. But I believe that I demonstrate that although gender issues certainly existed in SNCC, the narrowing roles for white women after the summer of 1964 came at least in part because the authors were white, and not simply because they were women. Black women did not face the same narrowing of their roles in SNCC at the time, and did not join with Hayden and King for that reason. Hence, Hayden and King's paper against male domination in SNCC can therefore be read in some measure as a protest against SNCC's rising black nationalism, as Jama notes. I should also note that Cynthia Griggs Fleming's autobiography of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, and Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Entered* are important works dealing with the relations between white and black women. Wini Breines's book, *The Trouble Between Us*, arrives at many of the same conclusions that I come to. Unfortunately for me, her book came out prior to my book's publication, but after I'd finished everything but the revisions, and so I didn't really draw on her experience.

Although I disagree with her conclusions, Roxanne puts her finger on a problem area both for the book and for the white New Left: the question of class. I struggled with the notion of integrating an analysis of class into my overall analysis of why the white New Left failed. My difficulty here is that I understand white American class history as being fundamentally shaped by a cross class alliance whose ideological basis reads: white is better than black. The poor whites of the South, the Irish (and the Jews) in New York, the Poles and the Italians in Chicago, to name a few groups, all dealt with their masters to keep the blacks down and out. If this is true, then it seems to me that only a movement or an analysis which puts race first, which undoes the deal between white working class Americans and their bosses, only such a movement or analysis can successfully begin to expose the meaning of class in American society. In any case, to be absolutely truthful, my circumstances prohibited me from developing this line of thinking any further than I'd taken it. I struggled to understand the ³three pillars of failure² because I think these are the most basic to the story. I hope that other scholars can better describe the ways in which America's very developed class structures have shaped the identities of white activists.

I thank Peniel Joseph for his very thoughtful contribution. While it may sound self-serving to agree with the nice things a reviewer says of your work, I can't help but remark on Peniel's comment that in taking the ideas of the Black Power movement seriously, my book ³offers an important contribution to new histories of the 1960s, the New Left, and the black freedom struggle.² Historians of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements have gone into the ideas of these movements, with Peniel's *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour* as perhaps the most recent and comprehensive of these studies. On the other hand, while historians of the white New Left have acknowledged Black Power's tremendous importance, good or bad, they have for the most part failed to enter into any adequate exploration of that movement's

ideologies and values. Read Gitlin's *Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, for example, and find any coherent explanation for Black Power rage, anger, bombast, this is what we get from Gitlin. From Kazin and Isserman's *America Divided*, we get the standard 1960s media refrain on Black Power: ³what does it really mean?² But, unless I missed something as I quickly reviewed their book the other day, they present no meaningful discussion of what Black Power or Black Nationalism might have meant to millions of black people, or even what it meant to Black Power leaders, who very clearly said what they thought. Might this be the continuation of some old New Left habits? I'm very glad that Peniel highlighted this place that my book has in New Left historiography. I suppose it's also significant, then, that Peniel advises me to try to understand Black Power in far broader terms than the political ones I manage in *Hard Rain*.

I am thankful to David Farber for having read and commented on *Hard Rain*. I struggled to understand David's negative assessment of my book and I believe that the key to this assessment lies in David's final paragraph on his current work on the Young Americans for Freedom. David writes, ³The success of the YAF in contributing to a powerful Right-Wing movement in the United States would seemingly give some credibility to the argument that Maurice Isserman, Todd Gitlin and others have made that the specific failure of SDS might be linked more to its most influential members' failures to understand their political moment and the culture of democratic politics in the United States than it does to SDS's white members' inability to rid themselves of their racism and the lie of whiteness¹². In David's perspective, then, YAF activists were successful, and SDS activists failed, because the right wingers better read the ³political moment and the culture of democratic politics in the United States.²

I do not for one moment believe that YAF activists, neo-cons, etc., better read the historical moment than did white New Leftists, or Malcolm, Martin, Stokely, Fred Hampton, or any of the millions of people who fought for black freedom and against unjust wars in the sixties. On the contrary, 300 years of slavery, segregation, male domination, and manifest destiny created and perfected not only the material systems of domination we inherited in the 1960s, but also vast ideological systems, continually churning out propaganda proving that domination was really freedom. The task confronting the Karl Roves and Grover Norquists, then, consisted of little more than accepting and defending the identities that this history and associated ideology had conferred upon them. They did not better read the historical moment; they unambiguously chose to defend the past, which appeared to them as a defense of their own being. In contrast, the task confronting those of us who fought for social change in the sixties was infinitely more complex. We not only had to fight institutions of domination and their defenders, but we were also burdened with identities that had been shaped by the history of those very institutions. If we may liken history to a body say a train in motion, then the YAFers simply hopped on board and rode the train, the more prominent of their numbers rising to positions of great authority on this bloody railroad. They played engineer. On the other hand, we activists sought to make history, and we did a little. What they did any male child born in their circumstances could have done. What we did and what we, all of us who fought for change, what we tried to do, what we wanted, was that all people could lead a decent life on this planet. Unfortunately, we failed, David.

It's an extraordinary privilege for an author to see his work through the eyes of others and I thank all four readers for their contributions and Ed Martini for having pulled this roundtable together.

David Barber

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