

Hillbilly Nationalists and the Making of an Urban Race Alliance

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Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011), 200 pages, \$16.95, paperback.

Chicago is famed as a city of neighborhoods. Its reputation as such makes it seem like an adorably homey place to live or, as people are fond of describing it to visitors and friends alike, as a “big city with a small-town feel.” But the city’s open secret is that it does not just operate as any small town, but as a small town in the 1930s, with a segregation so deeply felt and embedded that it needs to be called out for what it is, a form of racism that surveils ethnic and racial populations to ensure they do not stray from their designated borders. The city’s increasingly ramshackle and inefficient public transportation system was designed along racial lines, with a system that makes it difficult for mostly white northsiders and mostly black southsiders to commute easily between their neighborhoods. On the west, areas like Humboldt Park and Pilsen are mostly Latino/a (with wide swaths being rapidly gentrified by white hipsters) and similarly cordoned off as ethnic enclaves.

The neighborhood of Uptown, where I live, has long had a reputation for being the most ethnically and economically diverse neighborhood. “Diverse,” a word with a long history of problematic liberal politics around multiculturalism, is also Chicago-speak for “poor and black/brown.” Uptown is known for its preponderance of Single Resident Occupancy units (SROs) and its many adult day care and senior centers. It abuts the slightly tonier Andersonville, whose Chamber of Commerce adheres to a tourist-driven narrative about the area as a Swedish neighborhood—ignoring the plain evidence of several Latino, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian businesses and residents. Realtors will go so far as to list Uptown condos as Andersonville properties, and

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have gone so far as to rename sections “East Andersonville” in a desperate attempt to scrub any associations with the poorer cousin to the south and east.

Uptown is also famous as the resting place for tens of thousands of mostly white Appalachians who moved here during and after the Second World War. If you know the right kind of neighborhood historian, it is easy to see where the area’s long-ago speakeasies once existed, now replaced by African fabric stores and Vietnamese restaurants specializing in pho. For the most part, the area’s white and black working-class bars have been swept away by both a generational climb out of poverty and rapid gentrification (and new influxes of Asian and African working-class immigrants have changed the landscape significantly).

The former era’s last working-class bar in the area, the Red Rooster, was razed this summer to make way for an expansion of the Red Line. Amy Sonnie and James Tracy are, doubtless, unsurprised by any of this. Their book *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power* recovers a long-forgotten history of urban organizing by focusing on five groups: Jobs or Income Now (JOIN), the Young Patriots Organization (YPO), and Rising Up Angry in Chicago’s Uptown, along with White Lightning in the Bronx and October 4 Organization (O4O) in Philadelphia.

It is not that there is any dearth of histories of left organizing, but these for the most echo the presumed racial divides in left organizing in the United States, focusing either on black or white organizers. When it comes to class, there is a tendency to assume that white organizers are middle to upper class while black organizers are feted for their fealty to lower-class origins. Much of this racial and class divide in historicizing has to do with a more general contempt for the white working class, even amongst the left. Consider, for instance, the inevitable discussions around gun control and the widely held assumption that all killers are “rednecks.” In fact, David Keene, the current head of the NRA is a law school graduate, and one of the most powerful conservatives in the country; he was also responsible for allowing the gay Republican group GOProud into the Conservative Political Action Conference. In all of this, it is also assumed that “rednecks” are inherently racist and violent towards blacks and other people of color.

As Sonnie and Tracy point out, urban neighborhoods began to change swiftly in the 1960s and ‘70s, creating infamous racial conflicts amongst and between different ethnic and racial groups. They write: “There’s a reason West Side Story tells a tale of true love tragically

divided. Would anyone believe the plot if the Sharks and the Jets had joined forces to fight the police and open a community health clinic? Popular history gives us so many of these stories that tales of racial unity seem romantic at best, propaganda at worst” (7).

In fact, as the book details, black and white groups in cities like Chicago did actually come together to create health clinics as well as advocacy services for poor people. The neighborhoods in which these groups operated were harassed by landlords and city officials determined to scrub urban areas of what they considered the blight of the working class, whom they were only too happy to exploit for their cheap and plentiful labor. Much of the work done by these groups was truly grassroots and revolutionary, using tactics of self-help and empowerment. Rising Up Angry’s legal program “trained neighborhood people to perform intakes, write legal briefs and handle basic ‘know your rights’ counseling on immigration, police brutality, housing rights and the draft” (119). Its actions included organizing a large group to go to the Chicago Civic Center Housing Court to successfully aid Margaret Burton in her eviction case. Of her eleven children, half tested positive for lead poisoning, which was a deadly epidemic in low-income Chicago neighborhoods. This was not simply an isolated action to restore an individual to her housing, but part of a larger tenant organizing campaign.

In the Bronx, White Lightning, named both for its mission of organizing whites and a street name for heroin, consisted largely of ex-drug addicts committed to radical politics. But where even other radical groups expelled drug users, White Lightning took on the politics of the drug trade and the criminalization of addicts, a politics that seems incredibly prescient today given that such work, in the early 1970s, was barely on the radar of radical organizing in the years before the War on Drugs would become a punitive and harsh regime used to control the most vulnerable populations and cities: “Though it took more than thirty years for published reports of crack-cocaine trafficking by intelligence agencies to surface, Lightning and the Panthers always suspected government culpability in the growing drug epidemic” (156). In Philadelphia, O4O would become part of a citywide campaign that defeated the racist agenda of Mayor Frank Rizzo.

Hillbilly Nationalists provides a history that will be surprising to many accustomed to thinking of white working-class participation in civil rights struggles only as an absence or even as outright hostility. As it happens, the alliances between groups like YPO and the Black Panthers

were rich, complex, and emerged from a constant dialogue between them. The book opens with a striking photograph of two men with their backs to the camera, a Black Panther in leather and a beret, standing next to a white YPO member wearing a sleeveless denim jacket with the words “YPO Patriots” hand-stitched above a Confederate flag patch. The use of an iconic symbol of white supremacy for a group that actively worked with the Panthers and against white supremacy might seem strange, but as the authors point out, it was a deliberate choice, “a blatant middle finger to the student left,” comprised mostly of middle-class students who echoed a larger cultural disdain for poor whites (75). In addition, YPO “also needed a radical uniform they could actually afford” and “[f]lag patches were cheap from the local military surplus store and sewing them onto jean jackets and berets seemed easy enough.” Panther Bob Lee gave the group his blessing, “so long as members were up for all the explaining they would have to do” (76).

This book details a time when genuinely radical practices were not only evident in urban struggles, but even at times dangerous. More importantly, the coalitions made possible by poor blacks and whites also resulted in an expansion of the kind of community activism and service provision made popular and famous by the Black Panthers.

None of this was easy but what united poor blacks and whites was an awareness of the common enemy of the state that willfully hunted down the most vulnerable in the years when cities like Chicago were highly contested terrains on the cusp of the neoliberal nightmare of “urban development.” The book is an account of movements whose work had a more lasting impact than can be judged by the indices of judgment used by the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) that has since supplanted them. While the groups eventually dismantled, its members were permanently radicalized and went on to do work that continued to build on their radical vision. In Chicago, for instance, members of JOIN helped elect the city’s first black mayor, Harold Washington.

Hillbilly Nationalists is not a playbook for current times. The presence of the NPIC now overwhelms everything else, and the work of grassroots change is now almost entirely taken over by an enormous cadre of generations of professional activists, drawn from the very middle-class strata that YPO held in contempt. In Chicago, the work is increasingly segregated by race, and social service organizations are staffed by people armed with increasingly arcane degrees in non-profit management, and whose work often seems to consist more of grantwriting to stay afloat than in service provision.

A dense and important history, this work could have greatly benefited from an index: the lack of one is incredibly frustrating for anyone who wants to reference key groups and events for further reading or discussion. Still, this is an important book because it discusses race without the shoddy sentimentality of multiculturalism that has since overtaken the organizing efforts we see beginning in it. It traces the lives and careers of people who are otherwise generally neglected, like JOIN organizer Peggy Terry.

As a book that is mostly about Chicago, *Hillbilly Nationalists* is also important for its centering of radical work in the Midwest, as opposed to the bicoastal histories that most people associate with radical politics. It ends with the question: “Where is the heartland today, and where is the Left in it?” (73). The most effective answer to that question may have to involve unfixing ourselves from a popular notion of what the heartland might mean. Today, neoliberalism forces migrations of millions into the country but also within it, as people are pushed out from urban areas to make place for gentrification and then bused in again as low-paid workers who cannot afford to live in the neighborhoods in which they work. In Uptown, the condos that went up in the boom of the 2000s are now vacant shells, soon to be given over to office spaces and bought out by flippers who rent them out. The white organizers of today, even those who did important work in the 1960s and ‘70s, have also left behind a legacy of proprietorship, a sense that they are still owed a massive debt of gratitude for having worked in interracial organizing, and this attitude makes work difficult in a city already cleaved by historical racism. In the midst of the left looking to define itself, it might be a good thing that both the concepts of “the left” and the heartland stand under threat of erasure and instability. *Hillbilly Nationalists* provides a view of what a genuinely radical, even if more difficult, world could look like.



The world is being carried to the brink of ecological disaster not by a singular fault, which some clever scheme can correct, but by the phalanx of powerful economic, political, and social forces that constitute the march of history. Anyone who proposes to cure the environmental crisis undertakes thereby to change the course of history.

—Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle*, 299