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Enemies of the State

An Open Discussion with Political Prisoners Marilyn
Buck, David Gilbert and Laura Whitehorn

Meg Starr and Matt Meyer

1998

The government and mainstream media have used their formidable powers to prevent the circulation of any real information about political prisoners; Marilyn Buck, David Gilbert, Laura Whitehorn and others.

Small wonder. Like John Brown, these white activists took up arms against the US government in solidarity with oppressed peoples. Invisible in the social democratic or liberal histories of the 1960s is the logic of their progression from public to clandestine activism. In the following interview these three help us to understand an important part of radical history so often distorted. They are all now serving prison terms for such “unthinkable crimes” as infiltrating the Klan, robbing money from banks and giving it to Black self-defense patrols, helping to liberate Black Liberation Army (BLA) leader Assata Shakur, and bombing the Capitol in response to the US invasion of Grenada.

Marilyn Buck was among the first women to address the national Students for a Democratic Society (SDS, a radical mass anti-war organization) around issues of sexism. Her experiences working with

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the Black community and protesting the Vietnam War led to her consistent resistance. She is serving an 80-year sentence for conspiracies to free political prisoners, to protest and alter government policies through the use of violence, and to rob banks to fund Black liberation organizations.

David Gilbert was a founding member of Columbia University SDS and returned to Columbia three years later to help organize the 1968 student strike. He was a charter member of Men Against Sexism in Denver. He is serving a 75-years-to-life sentence on charges of participating, as an anti-racist ally of the BLA, in the 1981 Brinks robbery and shoot-out.

During the Vietnam War, Laura Whitehorn organized 400 women in a take-over of the Harvard University administration buildings. She worked with anti-racist whites to defend Black communities from attack, and helped found the Madame Binh Graphics Collective, a radical art group. She is now serving a 23-year sentence for conspiracy to protest and alter government policies through the use of violence against government property.

Many readers of *Love and Rage* have participated in some form of work around prisons: protesting the growth of the prison industry, exposing control unit torture, supporting social prisoners and political prisoners. All of this is important. Agitating around prisons can expose the true nature of US democracy, and it can alleviate prisoners' daily suffering. The use of prison to control communities of color and all poor and working-class people is a vital means by which the state maintains power. All the more reason why the State systematically removed over one hundred political prisoners and prisoners of war from the movements to liberate those communities.

As fellow radical activists, the political prisoners and prisoners of war are part of our closest roots, our nearest heritage. This is true whether or not we agree with every aspect of their analysis. As BLA anarchist political prisoner Kuwasi Balagoon once said, "I

worked with the Nationalists and the Marxist-Leninists because they were the ones getting down and fighting.”

The suffering of the political prisoners is held over our heads as a deterrent. It is one aspect of the repression and control of our movements. In this light we should carefully examine how our organizations relate to political prisoners. An organization’s choice to distance itself from political prisoners may be one way of denying the realities of state repression. Connecting with political prisoners not only keeps us in contact with some of the harsh realities of State repression, it also lends continuity to our own revolutionary goals. By continuing to affirm their politics, and by remaining activists on the inside, the prisoners themselves subvert the government’s power.

Whether or not our specific daily work is around political prisoners or prison conditions, we should give them organizational priority and carry both issues in our hearts. In our imaginations, we can smash the barriers of fear and prison, as we organize to tear down the very real walls.

The following is an excerpt from one of the first public dialogues released by anti-imperialist white political prisoners in which they review their past actions and current political stands. We hope this discussion will initiate a broader dialogue on strategies and tactics, past and present.

1) When you made your decisions to take militant action, a sense of world-wide revolution was on the rise. Now, although there are many trends of protest and fight-back, reaction appears to have consolidated. In this context, do you regret the sacrifices you made to fight against US imperialism?

Laura: A resounding NO! First of all, I believe that change can never take place without resistance. No matter how overwhelming the odds, struggle is the only path to justice. Without resistance,

there is no hope of a better future, and resistance often demands sacrifice. To me, the decision not to fight-not to resist-would mean sacrificing my own humanity. That would be much worse than the sacrifices that I've had to make.

I believe that all kinds of resistance are necessary to oppose the consolidation of reactionary forces. I don't feel that any of the forms of resistance I've been involved in over the past twenty-five years-from mass struggle to armed actions-are irrelevant to the future of progressive movements.

2) Today's radicals more commonly talk about various systems of oppression. You tend to use the term imperialism. How do you define it?

David: Imperialism is built on and incorporates the structures of patriarchy and capitalism. And it is important-whatever name we use-to recognize the fullness of all modes of oppression: class exploitation, male supremacy and the related homophobia, white supremacy, and the host of other ways human beings are demeaned and limited.

But I think it all comes together in a more or less coherent social structure, with a range of sophisticated and brutal methods a ruling class uses to maintain power. The term "imperialism" is valuable because it emphasizes the importance of a global system: the polarization of wealth and power between a few rich and controlling "centers" (Western Europe, the US and Japan) and the impoverished "periphery" of the third world. The wealth of one pole is totally connected with the abject poverty of the other; the human and natural resources of the third world have been ruthlessly exploited to build up the developed economies. Thus, "imperialism" speaks most directly to the oppression of three-quarters of humankind.

That vantage point helps us see why third world struggles have been so central in the modern world. And there is the added resonance with the foundation of the US on the internal colonization of Native Americans, New Afrikans (Blacks), Mexicano/as and Puerto Ricano/as. This helps explain the depths of racism within this coun-

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Meg Starr and Matt Meyer are members of R 'n B, a Brooklyn, New York-based affinity group which has published an unedited version of the above discussion. To obtain a copy, contact them c/o [contact information removed for web –editor].

iconoclasts, once they became cadre, would abandon their critical faculties in order to curry favor with leadership. These patterns recurred so often that I think recriminations over which individuals were better or worse miss the point—there’s been a deep problem around process for building a revolutionary movement.

By process, I mean how we conduct political discussion, how we make and implement policy decisions, how we treat each other as individuals. The Leninist theory of democratic-centralism [which leaves final decision-making in the hands of a representative central committee] sounded beautiful, but in my experience resulted always in overly hierarchical organizations. So I can only conclude that the theory itself is seriously flawed. I don’t know of any well-defined solution to these problems. The women’s movement has done some valuable, if uneven, work in this area, and perhaps the Christian base communities in Latin America have as well. It is very difficult to achieve, simultaneously, a disciplined combat organization and a fully democratic and humane process—yet both are emphatically necessary. There is an important sense in which we have to try to implement the adage “the personal is political”; the ideals we express in our politics must also be put into practice in our human relationships.

Why hasn’t there been more written on our errors? The danger of revealing security details to the state can be readily overcome by focusing on the political themes and lessons. So I believe the main problem has been our reluctance to face up to and analyze our errors, along with the lack of consensus about them. There is no way to sugarcoat it: this dearth of self-criticism and analysis marks a serious failure to carry out our responsibilities to the movement.

Marilyn, David and Laura’s own analysis and self criticisms will be found, along with their thoughts for the future, in Part two of this interview. Marilyn Buck can be contacted directly at #00482-285, FCI Pleasonton, 5701 8th Street, Camp Parks B, Dublin, CA 94568. David Gilbert can be contacted directly at #83A6158, Great Meadow Correctional Facility, P.O. Box 51, Comstock, NY 12821.

try, and why that has so often corroded potentially radical movements amongst white people.

3) Some movement activists believe that violence cannot be justified for any reason, and even a few political prisoners have said that they were wrong to engage in violent acts. What are your feelings on revolutionary violence? How have they changed over the years?

David: Those who hold power have successfully sold the idea that political violence comes exclusively from the opponents of the system. It’s obscene to accept those parameters; they demand a heartless silence about the untold and incalculable violence of the system—massive and brutal, yet unnoticed because it is structured into the foundation of the status quo.

So let’s start with just a glimpse of the what the daily functioning of imperialism means in people’s lives. Each year, twelve million children under the age of five die from malnutrition and easily preventable diseases— that’s 32,000 per day. 1.2 billion people live with virtually no access to health care; 1.6 billion people don’t even have direct access to drinkable water. One hundred million children lack the most basic schooling.

This colossal suffering is not an act of nature. We easily produce enough to meet all basic human needs. Abject poverty continues so that, for example, the 358 richest individuals in the world can amass a combined net worth of 760 billion dollars, more than the combined net worth of the poorest two and half billion people put together.

Enforcing such a vicious social order requires the repressive regimes around the world that have jailed, tortured, “disappeared,” or murdered hundreds of thousands — actually millions — of persons. I was initially a pacifist, but never one who condemned the resistance of the oppressed. The only principled form of nonviolence—as beautifully exemplified by people like Dave Dellinger or Fay Honey Knopp—is to constantly and creatively struggle against the infinitely greater violence of the social system.

After seven years of activism and analysis, I reluctantly concluded that there wasn't a chance against the forces of repression without developing a capacity for armed struggle. But there certainly have to be clear moral standards regarding how that struggle is implemented. With armed struggle- as with any aspiration to play a "leading" role — it is very easy to fall into the corruption of ego. So it is essential to have firm guidelines to keep such actions completely directed towards dismantling the power structure and to take the utmost precautions to avoid hurting civilians.

We have to be sure that our action always furthers the interests of the oppressed, and to build their participation rather than aggrandize the armed group's own power and status. There have to be forums for criticism from and accountability to the oppressed. Of course, there remain critical issues about what constitutes an effective strategy, questions that I'm not addressing here but which are far from settled.

During our trial, we were besieged by attacks on armed struggle — of course from the mainstream but also, in various forms, from within the left. We felt embattled, and we in turn were very dogmatic in treating armed struggle as the principle rather than as one of the necessary means to fight to stop oppression. On a personal level, I regret that we weren't capable of expressing publicly a feeling of loss and pain for the families of the two officers and the guard who were killed during the Brinks expropriation. Even in a battle for a just cause, we can't lose our feeling for the human element. It's not like these three men were picked as targets for being especially heinous or conscious enforcers of the system. Rather, they just happened to be the representatives of the states' and banks' armed forces who responded on that day. So it must have felt like a completely senseless and bitter loss to their families.

The pain of the human losses, on both sides, is even more regrettable because of the serious political errors we made in how this action came down. I feel sorry for the losses and pain of the fami-

was a fifteen-year history of armed action carried out by white anti-imperialists.

Our other main achievement, as Marilyn and Laura have discussed, was fighting in solidarity with third world struggles. Our practice in this area was inconsistent and inadequate, but we did succeed at times in making this work a visible priority. It was also significant that so many women participated and were leaders in the clandestine organizations, although this did not mean that we were able to overcome our sexism in terms of our program or personal relationships.

A main problem was various forms of racism. It's amazing how deep this stuff runs, that even while consciously opposing it, we continued to make racist errors. We often wanted to be validated as "the most revolutionary white folks going," either through our own claim of overall leadership of a "multinational US revolution" or, once that was discredited, by getting the stamp of approval from a heavy third world group.

Another serious error has been militarism, which sees as all-important the military deeds and daring of a small group instead of the political principles and the concerted effort to build a movement at all levels. Militarism is usually bolstered by sectarianism and a contempt for those leftists who don't engage in armed struggle or who have a somewhat different political line. These errors are dangerous because they cut you off from potential allies and at the same time encourage attempts to prove yourself by upping the military ante beyond what you can sustain.

Looking at the repetition of these well-identified errors, I have to say — it might not sound very political, but I think that it is — that ego is one hell of a problem. You can be attracted to a cause for the most idealistic of reasons, and endure personal sacrifices to build an organization, only to get caught up in all kinds of maneuvers for power and status. Once you're into this dynamic, it is easy to rationalize that your only concern is for the cause. Very decent people, once in leadership, would become highly manipulative; former

rejected as reformist the struggles for “equal rights” in a capitalist context, and believed that women’s liberation required a revolutionary confrontation with institutionalized male supremacy — a socialist revolution. Women in developing socialist countries confronted the harsh reality that the institutions and social attitudes of male supremacy did not automatically disappear with the victory of national liberation. Women have had to continue to struggle for their rights, and to redefine their roles long after liberation has been won. Despite these theoretical understandings we did not join in struggles specific to women which are important steps in the process to destroying male supremacy and its institutions.

This was even more true of lesbian and gay liberation. So many of us and our comrades were dykes, yet support for lesbian and gay liberation was barely a part of our program. We listed it as something we struggled for, but never did any programmatic work to give it life. We failed to even struggle against homophobia when it presented itself, and often kept closeted about our own lesbianism. This was true even with some of our closest comrades in various third world liberation movements. We had been part of a strong anti-imperialist sector of the early anti-war and women’s liberation movements, and building actions in support of Viet Nam and other national liberation struggles specifically as lesbians and women. But as time went on, we lost some of the aspects of our politics that embraced human liberation on a broad revolutionary scale.

David: Our first outstanding accomplishment was piercing the myth of government invincibility. In 1970, the conventional wisdom was that the Weather Underground Organization (WUO) wouldn’t last a year because ‘the F.B.I. always got their man!’ But the WUO functioned for seven years — until we split and disbanded due to internal political weaknesses — and carried out more than twenty bombings of government and corporate buildings without so much as injuring a single civilian. Including other formations such as the United Freedom Front, there

lies of those who were killed. I feel also the pain to my own family, who never got to make choices about the risks I would take. And I feel self-critical for political mistakes and setbacks in the struggle against this criminal social system.

The cost of errors that are made in the course of armed struggle are very visible. At the same time, it is a shame that the very grave errors of inaction, of not fighting hard enough, are rarely even noticed. What were the costs, in terms of violence, of the terrible passivity of most of the white left during the FBI and police campaigns of the 1960s and ‘70s.

4) What do you find to be some of the achievements or the errors of the anti-imperialist movement and its armed clandestine organizations that you participated in?

Laura & Marilyn: We feel that anti-imperialist politics and organizations made a number of important ideological contributions. We derived our strategy of revolutionary anti-imperialism from Che Guevara’s speech to Cuba’s Tricontinental Congress, and from the struggles his speech represented. To paraphrase his message: “Create Two, Three, Many Vietnams” — ultimately defeating the system of US-led imperialism by freeing the colonies (or oppressed nations) whose land, labor and resources provide the lifeblood of that system.

We were and are internationalists, meaning that we supported all anti-imperialist struggles around the world. We also accepted the particular responsibility to support those nations directly colonized and oppressed by our own government. We were (still are!) working for socialist revolution. North American (or predominantly white) anti-imperialist groups embraced the view that alongside the oppressed nations inside the US there exists an oppressor nation, made up of white people of all classes and organized by the power of white supremacy to function as part of any ruling-class strategy. White people, we believe, need to make a conscious decision and act explicitly to ally with the oppressed instead of the oppressor. As members of that oppressor nation, we

tried to analyze the effects of white skin privilege on us and on our organizations, as well as to remain aware of its effects on the oppressed nations.

One of our main achievements was to recognize that white supremacy is an institutionalized system, in contrast to the more accepted view that racism is an issue of bad ideas and attitudes. This gave us a different viewpoint from which to fight white supremacy on its many levels. Our tactics included education, agitation, demonstrations, campaigns, confrontations and clandestine activities. In a variety of cities and over quite a number of years, many revolutionary anti-imperialists established a strong practice of work, including fighting the Ku Klux Klan and other right-wing organizations, defending Black and Mexican communities under attack, supporting Black and Puerto Rican prisoners, exposing right-wing groups, building campaigns against racist killer cops and Klan in the police forces, etc. We also established material aid campaigns and clandestine support work for national liberation movements inside and outside the US borders.

Our understanding of the importance of fighting white supremacy and supporting the Puerto Rican and Black liberation struggles also led us to support prison struggles. We initiated projects in solidarity with political prisoners and Prisoners of War. We worked to expose the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which was responsible for destroying organizations, killing Black leaders like Fred Hampton, and putting others in prison. In our work to support political prisoners and POWs, we tried to educate people not only about the injustice and criminality of the system that imprisoned them, but also about who these revolutionaries are and why the government was so afraid of them.

The national liberation struggles and clandestine anti-imperialist allies acted to free political prisoners like Assata Shakur and William Morales. Nothing can ever cast a shadow on the importance of their freedom. These were achievements the

public anti-imperialist movement played a role in as well; they created an atmosphere of support within the community and resisted police and FBI attempts to find the liberated prisoners. From 1967 to the mid-1980s, both the above-ground anti-imperialist organizations and the armed clandestine groups marched, demonstrated, and fought. They staged mass militant actions and armed actions. We built material aid campaigns for most of the leading struggles for freedom around the world — from Viet Nam, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, the Congo/Zaire and Zimbabwe, to the struggles at Wounded Knee, Big Mountain, and in Puerto Rico, to the Black Panther Party and all the struggles for independence, land and political power led by revolutionary Black Nationalists.

David: Some of our errors included being unclear about what we meant when we said our strategy was carried out “under third world leadership.” At times, we interpreted what the leadership of any given struggle was arguing for to suit our own politics. At others, we became involved in debates inside other movements that were inappropriate for us to be active in. It's fine to have opinions and positions about the liberation struggles of other peoples who you support, but it was and is wrong to intervene in the middle of debates within a national liberation struggle.

A major problem of our work was our inability to organize larger numbers of white people to work with us. While many people over the years attended activities and actions that we held, our standards of commitment were so stringent that people wouldn't join our groups. Internally, our misuses of the process of self-criticism, and our strict or distorted methods of leadership served to weaken rather than to strengthen members and discouraged people from joining. Our sectarian approach to relations with other North American leftists also damaged our work on many levels.

Our analysis was that as women, we wouldn't win our liberation in a struggle separate from the defeat of imperialism and the transformation of society towards a more collective, socialist model. We