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An Historian in History: Staughton Lynd (1929-2022)



Dave Dellinger, Staughton Lynd, Bob Moses splashed with red paint by a pro-war provocateur while Protesting the War in Vietnam, during the Assembly of Unrepresented People, Washington DC, August 6, 1965.

“When I was a teenager in New York City I rode the subway for half an hour to get to school. I gave myself a radical education. One of the books I read, by an ex-Trotskyist named James Burnham and entitled *The Managerial Revolution*, laid out the way in which

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the rising middle class in medieval Europe created, first, new institutions, and only second, a revolution, and concluded that nothing like this was possible in a capitalist society. Burnham particularly insisted that trade unions were not prefigurative institutions, that they would never challenge the capitalist economy comprehensively. Their role, Burnham argued, was at best to smooth a few of the rough edges and make capitalism tolerable for those it exploited.

When I got off the subway I hurried to my parents' bookshelves to find the answer to Burnham. I looked, for example, at Emile Burns' *Handbook of Marxism*. I couldn't find an answer then or for decades afterwards.

I tried to respond to Burnham's thesis in a different way at the end of the 1960s.

Those of you old enough to have lived through that time will recall that in those years there again came to the fore the Marxist idea that the working class would lead the way in creating a new society. So I briefly considered looking for a job in a steel mill. A young friend employed at U.S. Steel's Gary Works told me that if I did so, after twenty years workers would still say to each other about me, "Let's see what the Professor thinks."

I decided that I might do better seeking to assist those same workers by offering a needed skill."

Staughton and Alice Lynd (b.1930) belonged to a remarkable generation of giants like Howard Zinn (1922-2010) and Rosalyn Zinn (1922-2008); Noam Chomsky (b.1928) and Carol Chomsky (1930-2008): couples who took controversial, unpopular public stands on the key issues of their day, especially civil rights, the Vietnam War, and subsequent wars, regardless of the potential consequences, and held fast to lifelong commitments. (The Lynds wrote a memoir of their life together, *Stepping Stones*, published in 2008.) Although the men became famous as activist professors, no one who knew them spoke of them in the singular. Historian Marilyn Young (1937-2017) spent summer vacations with 'Howie and Ros' in Cape Cod. She knew them from Cambridge-Boston before moving to Ann Arbor and leading teach-ins against the war. Like 'Noam' and 'Howie', Staughton was an inspiration to Marilyn, who had done her Ph.D. at Harvard with John King Fairbank, and had two small children to care for, so did not go to Mississippi with the Zinns and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee during the Freedom Summer of 1964.

Historian Marcus Rediker has written the definitive portrait of Staughton's life and thought—Staughton led SNCC's Freedom Schools, of course— and there is no mistaking the

latter's influence on the former (and, truth be told, vice-versa). For the historian of modern Brazil, Barbara Weinstein, who grew up across Church Ave. from Marilyn Young in East Flatbush a generation after her, Lynd was "an icon" of the US New Left. For Jeff Gould, the historian of Nicaragua and El Salvador – who took part in the 1968 occupation of Columbia as a high school student, before witnessing Italy's 'hot autumn' in Rome, followed by the ousting of Somoza in Managua – he was a "personal hero." This illustrates the breadth of Lynd's influence and impact within SDS in the 1960s, the best of the radical (and, in no small measure, Jewish) academy that grew out of the civil rights, anti-war, feminist, and queer liberation movements during the 1970s and 1980s, as well as far beyond, in factories, churches, courtrooms, union halls, and prisons. In these amnesiac times, we forget Alice and Staughton's example at our peril, although two book-length studies have appeared: *The Admirable Radical: Staughton Lynd and Cold War Dissent, 1945-1970* (2010), by Carl Mirra, with a foreword by Howard Zinn, and a collection, *Side by Side: Alice and Staughton Lynd, the Ohio Years* (2014).

The son of famous Columbia sociologists went to Harvard as an undergraduate, but quit after reading Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*, which said that future human beings would be Aristotles and Goethes, or even something beyond. He returned, graduated, met Alice Niles, married in 1951, became a Quaker, and, in 1952, during the Korean War, fought for conscientious objector status within the military as an unarmed medic, but was re-baited out along with 100 others, and accompanied his mother, Helen Merrell Lynd, when she was unceremoniously hauled before HUAC in 1953, having been under FBI surveillance for several years for suspected Communist sympathies. His discharge from the army spoke of his mother as a "hyper-modern educator," and noted "the considerable Marxist philosophy in papers submitted at Harvard." Staughton and Alice lived on a commune in Georgia from 1954-57, raising children. They moved back to New York and Staughton then went to work as an organizer at the University Settlement House: "One day in the subway, it came to me that I did not want to chaperone teenage dances for the indefinite future."

In 1958, Staughton won the right to an honorable discharge, and hence GI Bill funding, to write a pioneering MA thesis at Columbia on land tenure and class struggle in the Hudson Valley during the revolutionary period. It was published in 1962. He served on the faculty at Spelman College, where, initially, only he and Zinn stood fast for civil rights; Zinn was one of two adult advisers to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and recruited Lynd to Spelman, as well as SNCC. Staughton, as noted, led the SNCC Freedom

Schools, and called the Freedom Summer his “most important political experience.” He was with Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the Democratic Convention in 1964. He also worked as a community organizer for Saul Alinsky in Chicago in 1965.

Unlike Stalinist-turned-Conservative historian Eugene Genovese (1930-2012) – or even Chomsky and Zinn – whose star waxed in the 1970s, Staughton was blacklisted in the mid-1960s after teaching first at Spelman, then Yale. (In the documentary film *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky relates that he expected the same fate once he began to oppose the war publicly in 1965.) Lynd left Spelman after Zinn was dismissed in 1963. In 1965, he landed five tenure-track jobs in Chicago after being denied tenure at Yale: all were rescinded. In a 2009 talk to teachers, called “What is to Be Done?” he states,

I lost my opportunity to make a living as a teacher when I tried to go all-out to stop the Vietnam war. I took account of all the rules and requirements. I went to Hanoi during Christmas vacation, and practically overturned the world Communist bureaucracy to be back in the States in time for my first scheduled class in the new year. It didn’t make any difference. The president of Yale said I had ‘given aid and comfort to the enemy,’ a phrase from the law of treason.

The book Lynd published with Tom Hayden, *The Other Side* (1966), made him a household name and ended his academic career. He published another book on the trip, *Mission to Hanoi* (1966) with the Communist Party historian Herbert Aptheker, thus placing himself beyond the pale.

When the Vietnam war came along, in addition to doing everything else I could think of to oppose it, I mailed my draft card back to my draft board. When you do these things, you don’t know at the time what’s going to happen. In that case, nothing happened. I was in my late 30s. They figured I wasn’t worth bothering with. But I can describe to you in minute detail the mailbox into which I dropped that letter, because I didn’t know at the time what the reaction would be.

For his anti-war leadership – see the iconic photo of Staughton, Dave Dellinger, and Bob Moses, locked in arms, paint-splattered red, at the march in Washington in 1965 – the Radical Historians’ Caucus tried to get him elected president of the American Historical Association in 1969. As president, he would persuade the organization to go on record against the war. Genovese helped foil the initiative, and went on to rule the radical historical roost from his post at the University of Rochester, rewarding friends while

punishing those he saw as enemies. Lynd outlasted him, though, and along with Zinn and the historian of indigenous movements in modern Ecuador, Marc Becker, participated actively in the Historians Against the War in 2002-3, in order to oppose the Iraq war within the AHA and in US society. (I joined the former, but not the latter.) Watch Staughton introduce a resolution in 2007, comparing it to the 1969 resolution:

During the height of the Iraq War, in a class on the Korean War in which I was her TA, I reminded Marilyn Young of Staughton's blacklist, and she could not believe she had forgotten it; she insisted it was an example of Cold War political repression of memory at work. This speaks to the difficulty of academic dissent in the US for Staughton's generation, and for Marilyn's. To Gould – then a politically and intellectually precocious teenager – Staughton's blacklisting also served as a cautionary tale about the perils of dissidence in academia.

Staughton wrote for key movement publications, like *Studies on the Left*, *Dissent*, *Socialist Revolution*, *Science and Society*, *Liberation*, and *Radical America*, and edited a book of published primary sources called *Nonviolence in America*, in 1966. The following year, in 1967, along with an edited volume called *Reconstruction*, he published a book of ten essays, *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the US Constitution*, with a preface by EP Thompson, and in 1968, *The Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism*, a pioneering social history of ideas.

Lynd completely upended received historical wisdom. In 1971, he co-authored one book with Michael Ferber, called *The Resistance*, about organizing opposition to the draft, and edited another, *Personal Histories of the Early CIO*. That year, he coined the phrase “guerrilla history” to describe a new way of relating to working-class people as subjects of history not of their own making, and as historians in potentia — he met a number of latter-day Tom Paines and True Levellers in Youngstown. In his obituary, Rediker casts Staughton as a revolutionary Seeker: a long way from narrow empiricism or 1950s Cold War consensus history, which Lynd and Zinn helped explode in the 1960s. In 1973, Lynd co-authored a book with Gal Alperovitz on strategy for socialist revolution in the US.

“Later,” Gould says, “he placed his intellect, courage, and creativity at the service of the labor movement in ways I only wish more of us could emulate.” Staughton followed Alice into law, taking a JD from the University of Chicago in 1976, and they put down roots in Niles, OH, near Youngstown, where they fought for steel mills owned and run by unions and communities, instead of plant shutdowns and capital flight, in the Mahoning Valley, which became the subject of *The Fight Against Shutdowns* (1982). Staughton then wrote

about Local 1330 v. US Steel for the *Journal of American History*. (These struggles and losses were analogous to what Christopher Hill studied among True Levellers, Seekers, and Diggers in *The World Turned Upside Down* and *The Experience of Defeat*.) Staughton wrote *Labor Law for the Rank and Filer: Building Solidarity While Staying Clear of the Law* in 1978, and he and Alice edited the classic oral history, *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working Class Organizers*, in 1981. In 2000, they edited *The New Rank and File*.

It is difficult to recall anyone other than Zinn whose scholarship was as fully integrated into his activism, as witnessed in Lynd's 2012 essay, "Doing History In and Out of Academia," and *Doing History from the Bottom Up: E.P. Thompson, Howard Zinn, and Rebuilding the Labor Movement* (2014).

Staughton speaks on the birth of radical history, lessons from Jesse Lemisch and Howard Zinn in particular, and quotes Subcomandante Marcos of the EZLN, at the Organization of American Historians' Meeting in 2008.

When I met the Lynds, Staughton had just published three books: one, in 1996, was an edited volume of the forgotten, working-class radicalism before the New Deal and the formation of the CIO— a lifelong interest; another, *Living Inside Our Hope: Confessions of a Steadfast Radical*, in 1997, offered a message to my generation about what it meant to stay the course; yet other in 1997 was about the Lucasville, OH, prison uprising on Easter Sunday in 1993. Zinn called it "one of the most powerful indictments of our 'justice system' I have ever read....The detailed transcripts (yes, oral history!) give great power to the whole story."

Staughton was a most accomplished storyteller. His stories told political and historical lessons, and Lucasville was one of the books he was most proud of having written. The story is incredible. With Alice, he served as lead counsel, as he had in Youngstown in the 1970s and 80s. They knew how to fight like hell, and brought a class action suit on behalf of all supermax prisoners, in favor of due process, that went to the US Supreme Court. Together with prisoners, they won that one.

Long before the stance was popular, Staughton and Alice were stalwart abolitionists, and well before I met them, they had corresponded and visited with prisoners, perhaps most notably George Skates, the white prisoner who had refused to play the deathly race card in Lucasville, and was willing to pay for solidarity with his life. Staughton said he learned more about the subject in one prison than he had in twenty steel mills.

Though the reach of their sympathies extended to Palestine, about which they co-edited a book of oral histories with Sam Bahour in 1994, titled *Homelands*, together they showed us how middle-class intellectuals – a subject of interest for Staughton, especially in relation to revolutionary Russia and Hungary in 1956 – might build political bonds with working-class people at home, who often faced life-or-death situations unknown to intellectuals, particularly in the criminal justice system. This, of course, meant addressing race head-on, which Staughton did throughout his entire adult life, far more clearly and successfully than most.

Solidarity was not an abstraction: it was a self-critical, concrete practice, anchored in specific places, institutions, and social customs and norms. This I learned from reading *Solidarity Unionism: Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Below* (1991). The Lynds provided something like a compass, with a clear north, in a time of ideological confusion and de-moralization on the left.

My connection to Staughton and Alice passed through Marcus Rediker and historian Peter Linebaugh, both of whom are tall compared to me or Staughton, not to speak of Alice; as far as I could tell, they, too, stood in awe. In October 1997, Marcus drove a tiny group of graduate students, including historian Gabrielle Gottlieb and actor Cornell Womack, from Pittsburgh to Youngstown for a Saturday meeting called by the Workers' Solidarity Club, designed to combine forces against the death penalty in OH and PA. The meeting was the deepest feeling of communion and fellowship I experienced in those – indeed, any – of my years in the US. I felt I had joined an antinomian family in which radical ideas were alive and kicking. This was not subcultural. We had work to do.

Peter had come in the night before from Toledo, and slept in the basement of the Lynd's home, surrounded by political buttons. He awoke early to the smell of porridge Alice had prepared – Staughton and Alice were singing a Bach cantata together.

During a break, I can't remember what I insisted on discussing with Staughton – it is unlikely to have advanced our common aims, that's for sure – but I recall that he was tolerant, listened carefully, and responded kindly, encouragingly, with very few words. While the proverbial light from his eyes, which he had in common with Marilyn, Charles Bergquist, and Mike Davis – late radical historians all – emanated in my direction, it seemed directed towards, and covered, the entire room, which I believe was a church basement.

A devout, lifelong (adult) Quaker Marxist, or Marxist Quaker, he had a meeting over which to preside, and may have been preparing himself spiritually even as I prattled on. If

this sounds far-fetched, I can call witnesses. Or simply wait patiently for the spirit to move them. This is the sort of moral and political authority he had, without the need for excess talk. It did not matter whether you were a Quaker or not. It rubbed off.

After I began to write about Bolivia, where I lived from 2003-5 in the pivotal years of national-popular insurrection led by Aymara indigenous people, conducting dissertation research on the Federal War of 1899, Staughton and I corresponded briefly via email, and he cited the writing I did with Sinclair Thomson in *New Left Review* in a paper he emailed me in fall 2005. In a 2006 interview with Democracy Now, he mentioned Bolivia as a source of hope for radical democratic social change, specifically the fact that a former domestic worker had become the new Minister of Justice. His 2008 book of interviews—published the year he underwent triple bypass surgery—*Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism, and Radical History*, and his 2009 Distinguished Lecture at the Fernand Braudel Center, “Toward Another World,” reflect the evolution of his thought in relation to Indigenous movements for self-government in Latin America – in his late seventies!

In 2009, both of his history books from the late 1960s were re-issued by Cambridge University Press, which he “had always considered the historians’ Holy Grail.” The long overdue recognition within the historians’ guild— a ball Marcus Rediker had gotten rolling in 2003— unleashed “an overwhelming rush of emotion”: he had finally been welcomed back into the fold. In 2011, he co-authored an essay published in *William & Mary Quarterly*— for the first time since the 1960s.

He also wrote *Accompanying: Pathways to Social Change* (2012), using a term borrowed from Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador to lay out a vision for how middle-class intellectuals might engage with struggles from below to democratize society, as he had been doing for close to 60 years. In 2017, he and Alice published *Moral Injury and Nonviolent Resistance: Breaking the Cycle of Violence*, a landmark study of the military and prisons ‘in our time’, to borrow the phrase coined by the late Marxist theorist Aijaz Ahmad (1941-2002) to describe the era of the collapse of national liberation, social democracy, and communism, and the rise of militarized neoliberalism, after 1991. An interview he and Alice gave in 2020 is [here](#).

Staughton also wrote an afterword to a 2020 book on the last ten years at Homestead Steel, from 1977-87, and his final piece, in 2022, is a foreword to a book on the 1930s bootleg coal rebellion in PA.

My most recent contact with Staughton and Alice came this past summer, through Marcus Rediker (again). They wanted me to include them and a comrade of theirs who teaches at Youngstown State in a short list of people to whom I send copies of my columns on South American politics. Staughton was in his early nineties. He and Alice wished to learn more. “Everything we know about learning instructs that people learn by experience”: this is a pedagogical point Staughton returned to repeatedly in talks and interviews, even as he continued to read widely, and write prolifically, in his eighties. Besides Chandler Davis (1926-2022), Noam Chomsky or Alice Lynd, who on the US left had as much political experience or wisdom as Staughton? Fortunately, he was generous in sharing, and his students are legion. He was a master teacher, beginning with the value of silence.

Where might the curious begin? First, Marcus Rediker’s obituary in *The Nation*. Then, perhaps, to fortify the spirit, the pamphlet Staughton and Alice wrote on Quaker Liberation Theology (2015). Or the *From Here to There: The Staughton Lynd Reader* (2010); or *The Essential Staughton Lynd* (2013); or *The World is My Country*, a collection of speeches and writings against the Vietnam War that will be out in 2023. Or the co-authored pamphlet with organizer Daniel Gross, *Solidarity Unionism at Starbucks* (2011). Or a picket line in support of Starbucks, Amazon, and other US workers fighting to form unions. Or all of the above, as part of a small group of activists building relationships and networks, wherever they happen to be.

¡Compañero Staughton Lynd, presente!

Salve salve Staughton Lynd, pessoal!

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