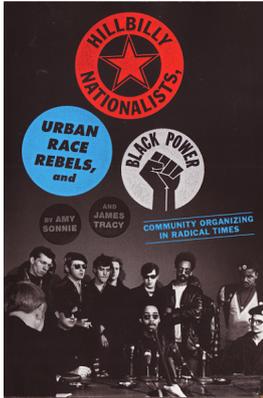


Written by Matt Dineen

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When we think back to the mass social movements of the 1960s who are the participants that come to mind? Most histories of that tumultuous period leave out an important segment of organizers that were committed to building multiracial alliances towards social justice. "In the United States," Amy Sonnie and James Tracy explain in their new book [*Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times*](#) (Melville House: 2011), "it's hard to imagine a broad Left movement that includes white poor and working class people as radical change agents." Their book seeks to bring to light this untold piece of the 1960s and the stories of those involved. I had a chance to speak in depth with Sonnie and Tracy, both longtime San Francisco Bay Area-based community organizers themselves, about this hidden history and what lessons it offers movements in these current radical times.

Matt Dineen: Can you start by telling us what this book is about?

Amy Sonnie & James Tracy: *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels and Black Power* explores the little-known history of working-class whites who worked closely the Black Panther Party and other important radical organizations in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York and other northern cities during the 1960s-70s. Together, they formed the original Rainbow Coalitions, more than a decade before Jesse Jackson ever claimed the phrase. This book chronicles how everyday people built multiracial unity and confronted the ascendance of the 1% decades ago. They mounted their own occupations, building takeovers, rent strikes, rock concerts, health clinics, schools and independent media. As Black Panther Bob Lee told us, "The rainbow was code word for class struggle."

MD: What inspired both of you to document these hidden histories?

JT: My inspiration for this book was simply to find tools I could use to be a better community organizer, particularly in my work with the Eviction Defense Network and other housing rights efforts. The challenge of building principled, strong alliances in an atomized society has been present in every campaign I've been a part of. Researching this forgotten piece of history was a way to learn from the mistakes and successes of multiracial organizing. And, in a practical way, I also wanted to write a book that reminds readers that the Left has been—and can still become—more relevant to everyday people.

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AS: My reasons were similar to James'. As a young organizer, I began researching Jobs or Income Now (JOIN) Community Union and the Young Patriots to understand how they centered racial justice in majority white communities. What I found was a family of organizations—including Rising Up Angry in Chicago, October 4th Organization in Philadelphia, and White Lightning in the Bronx—that addressed race, class, gender and place in tandem. Today, organizations struggle with these same intersections, and these groups show us some models that were creative, evolving and, of course, imperfect. They gave people a way to challenge their landlord and get some education, while keeping the focus on broader demands to end racism, poverty, sexism and war. I felt called to document their work because their direct-service programs, alliance building and global analysis were visionary, even as we see lessons in their limits.

MD: Your book is a product of nearly a decade of research, of historical documents from these struggles in addition to conversations you had with a number of movement participants. Looking back now on that initial inspiration to delve into this history, what are some of the most surprising or insightful things that came out of this extensive research?

JT: The inspiring thing about all of these groups is that they never gave up on the vision of an interracial movement of poor people, even when that vision came under fire from without and within. The search for unity wasn't based in abstract ideas of solidarity, but a concrete understanding of solidarity as survival. This required great risks. Often, they did profound work that was barely recognized as radical by parts of the student Left. But it was.

For example, Chuck Armsbury of the Patriots took his politics inside federal prison and carefully built inmate unity applying the principles of the original Rainbow Coalition. In Philadelphia, October 4th Organization defeated racist Mayor Frank Rizzo's attempt for a third term by working in a broad citywide coalition. Rising Up Angry managed to avert race wars between Chicago gangs. Their insight, then, lies in its radical simplicity: Build a base, start where people are at, yet inspire your organization to link local fights to the big picture of empire, war, racism, gender and class. Sometimes they took a militant political line, but most of their successes were linked to an ability to listen to people's needs and respond to them creatively.

AS: Absolutely. I think I was most surprised that no one had written about these groups before. We share the personal transformations of several people as well as the political context of the times. This history is incredibly rich and meant teasing out aspects of women's leadership and working-class women's feminism, how these groups dealt with racism among their members, integration and urban renewal programs that displaced thousands of poor families. This is history we need to know, especially now given the worsening economic crisis.

Most of the current generation never learned that the civil rights movement included demands for "jobs *and* freedom," that Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, the American Indian Movement and the Rainbow Coalition called for economic justice, decolonization, an end to rampant militarism, homophobia and sexism. Their vision was broad and it was global. There was no single demand, beyond maybe opposition to the Vietnam War, and the Left had an international presence with hundreds of thousands of people working for a livable future. More than just

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finding ways to “bring the war home,” the groups we write about found ways to instill a global consciousness in their members, connecting everyday issues to world affairs and building a sense of solidarity with people across the globe. I cannot underscore enough how important this is today and to wonder how today’s anti-immigrant backlash may have been curtailed if the many radical movements of the Sixties-Seventies hadn’t been destroyed by the federal government. Knowing this history can help us avoid the same pitfalls.

MD: Can you talk about the book tour you recently completed? From San Francisco to Chicago

, Philadelphia

to

New York

and beyond, what was this experience like retracing the geography and politics of these movements and sharing their stories?

AS: We interviewed more than sixty people for this book, so the tour really felt like a political family reunion. More importantly, each event opened a dialogue about social movements past and present. The question is always: How can people take the conditions they face and turn that into solidarity for justice? How does alliance building actually happen? We acknowledge that many historic movements have been broken apart by racism. Alliances take time, shared concerns, an historical analysis, and a real dedication to fostering trust. Our book shows how these five groups did this in partnership with the Black Panthers, Young Lords and other radicals of color. And so naturally we end up talking about how those lessons apply today.

In Chicago, we did one event in the Uptown neighborhood hosted by the Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Task Force. It turned out to be this incredible inter-generational dialogue between community organizers from the Sixties-Seventies, mostly white, and younger African American organizers working on anti-displacement, criminalization and gang violence. There was this mutual respect in the room. The younger folks were really excited to hear about the stories we’d uncovered about their neighborhood. And the veteran organizers from the Intercommunal Survival Committee and the Heart of Uptown Coalition listened and learned from the youth in the most genuine way I’ve seen in a while. Moments like that happened everywhere we went. Even at Syracuse University, we had students, faculty and librarians all sitting in small groups together sharing personal moments that politicized them and moved them to grapple with solidarity politics.

JT: Parts of the tour actually echoed the process of researching this book. It was deeply personal as well as political. By asking people to share their stories, we weren’t simply asking them to share a mechanical political analysis. Their political efforts were entwined with their own personal lives--marriages, divorces, kids, sectarian fights, government repression, hopes, victories and disappointments. It’s amazing to me that anyone wanted to talk at all! In the process of interviewing participants for the book, there was time to build trust and rapport. When you are showing up in a different city every night, you can’t relate to each person in the audience on that kind of level. You can simply present what you think you know. Still, many people did share their stories and this was a highlight of the tour for me. It reminded me that

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even Left scholarship can leave important stories out. So many of these stories provide the "threat of a good example," ignored and marginal because they don't fit the prevailing academic theories of change. But there is value and insight in those stories, and we were glad to be a part of surfacing them.

MD: This tour also sort of prophetically coincided with the emergence of a new social movement in the United States inspired by Occupy Wall Street. What was it like touring through these various cities and all of their different occupations?



AS: Yes, James and I were the accidental tourists of the Occupy movement. We left for tour just as the encampments sprung up and we got to visit seven sites from Los Angeles to Baltimore to the Bronx, Boston and Syracuse. Each city was different and struggling in the most beautiful way to shape its purpose. I was skeptical at first. But as we visited different cities and read updates online, I began to hope that the 99% could be a popular front, with broad participation addressing many issues under the big tent of racial, economic and gender justice; aiming to be accessible and participatory; local and global; and engaged in service-plus-action. That's my best hope. Now that we are home, in San Francisco and Oakland, we see that work continuing, succeeding, faltering, and threatened by the same familiar forces that always tear Left populist movements apart: police repression and some people's unwillingness to grapple with racism, sexism and ableism. It makes no sense to sit on the sidelines feeling hopeless about those forces. We need to figure this out *now*. And I have to say, I have never felt anything quite like the three-thousand person General Assembly in Oakland the night we approved the general strike. Direct democracy is powerful. For the first time in a generation, people feel inspired. We might just be the water that wears away at the bedrock of injustice — sometimes just a trickle, sometimes a rush.

JT: Now, thanks to the 99% and the encampments, debates about the future of the economy are no longer defined by the right wing. It was inspiring to see this unfold. As an organizer with twenty-plus years of experience, I had to hold my tongue, not criticize from the sidelines and just appreciate what has been done. Obviously, making this moment become an actual movement will take a ton of work, especially dealing with the very real differences within the 99%. How is it that the new precariat will function in the same movement with those who have lived at the bottom of the well for generations? This remains to be seen. But I can't stress enough though the feeling of excitement seeing this unfold. There's an enormous wealth of good already in the occupations today. It needs to be expanded on, deepened, and yes it could use a little more strategy and perhaps a few demands and proposals.

In every city, I was struck by how many of our contemporary debates in the movement are basically the same as ones from the 1930s and 1960s. The way I see it, good history from below helps today's organizers and activists pick up where the last generation left off. Our

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understanding of what has come before shapes what we see as possible now. We're desperately in need of new politics, but can't build that in an ahistorical way.

That said, it's disappointing that we're still having to deal with the same basic questions of racism and class hatred in the movement. For me it's a flashback to the Seattle WTO protests in 1999. The movement needs to be much farther along on these issues than it is. Uncritical celebration is useless, but so is unappreciative and moralistic guilt-tripping. There also has to be some deeper discussion of tactics, how to harness the differences between the non-violent protesters and the militants in a way that actually builds unity and puts Wall Street on the defensive. It wasn't too long ago that there was some good discussion around multiplicity of tactics. Now it seems that those quick to attack everyone else are dominating the discussion with polemics.

A positive thing that struck me is how in city after city youthful occupiers claimed they were inspired by the Arab Spring. Keep in mind that most of them came of age in the past ten years of intense anti-Arab racism in the United States. So there is the beginning of something quite profound here. It's going to take a lot of work and alliance building to make sure this potential is realized. It's one thing to draw leadership and examples from people who live thousands of miles away from you. It is another thing to create and strengthen relationships with people who live in the next neighborhood over. But that's something our book can contribute — a real example of the slow process of finding and acting in common cause.

MD: During events, how did you address connections between the current Occupy movement and the historical struggles against economic inequality and racism that *Hillbilly Nationalists* presents? What lessons can the 99% take away from the original Rainbow Coalition?

JT: I tried to talk about the lessons from the book in terms of alliance politics. I'd like to see the movement return to a real alliance-based approach, as opposed to coalition-based politics. An alliance is what is built slowly and intentionally where different groups discover what solidarity is about, beyond temporary arrangements of self-interest. That's when the 99% is going to finally come into its own.

AS: I think the Rainbow Coalition's service-plus-organizing approach is something we need just as urgently today. The Occupy movement is doing this and I think they need to keep it up, expanding indoors and becoming more organized. They are trying—however challenged they may be—to address the toll of nonexistent mental health services, to feed people and house people. This is complicated, but it's a crucial starting point. And just as the Panthers and Rainbow Coalition did in the Sixties, these services should be a place of ongoing education, discussion and cultural transformation. When the education system fails to teach you people's history, when it disempowers you by design, you turn the kitchen table into a classroom and create a culture of participatory politics.

My advice to folks was to dig in and do the work, center political education and suspend pessimism for a while. A highlight for me has been talking to my family about this, and hearing my mom say that Occupy Philadelphia is the first protest she's ever wanted to take part in. She

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lived through the Sixties unmoved by those movements, and this one moves her. It's moving so many people for the first time, and that's incredible. Is it overwhelming white? In some places, but as I said at our book events, this is not a bad thing. Many of us have been working a long time to energize white folks in the U.S. around social justice. The concern shouldn't be who is showing up, but rather how we center racial justice in the dialogue no matter who is sitting in the town square. I believe we need yet another challenge to white radicals to do this work, and for all of us to take responsibility for alliance building.

The 99% framework is an unprecedented opportunity for this. Within it we can confront what Gloria Anzaldúa called the "sliding scale of human worth used to keep human kind divided." We can expose the way that race has been used to divide the majority to maintain the power of the few. And it's our job as conscious organizers to make sure that subverting the sliding scale doesn't mean erasing very real differences in people's experience of injustice. The people hit first, worst and longest by this economic crisis have ideas about what we need and decades of experience organizing. The movement will only grow with their leadership and participation.

MD: Finally, I wanted to hear more about the personal process of writing this book for both of you. On the surface, it sounds impressive and scholarly that you spent nearly 10 years compiling this movement history, but I'm assuming there's more to that story. Can you give us a fuller picture of this process in terms of the daily realities of your own lives? What was the relationship like between researching, writing, and your own activism and wage work during this time?

JT: Just like some of the alliances we describe in our book, our literary alliance was built slowly and with a lot of hard work. Working with Amy has been one of the best collaborations I have ever been a part of. Since neither of us makes a living as a writer, we had to put a lot of energy into communication in order to finish this book with the few hours left in the day. She works at the public library and I work at an agency focused on housing homeless people. Juggling our work, activist and political lives has been complicated. But we both realized that getting these stories out had to become a priority. In the end, I'm not sure neither one of us would want to leave our day jobs to write; we each drew a lot of insight from the connections we make through our work. But damn, if there were only a few extra hours in the day.

AS: More hours in the day would be lovely. But affordable housing, food and healthcare would really have been great for this writer's sanity! The process took ten years because there was literally that much to uncover, but there's also no denying the book took longer to write because we both work. During the process, I worked two jobs well over 40 hours a week, went to grad school in an unrelated field and dealt with chronic illness. Not only was my partnership with James politically inspiring, it was practical. We could trade off tasks when one of us had a big organizing event, a health crisis or a family obligation. We were creative in the way all working folks need to be, relying on each other and on community to get things done. We each interviewed different people, then shared transcripts. We figured out our respective strengths and agreed on how to maximize those. I am a good editor and James is a natural networker, so even these last few months we decided I would do the final proofreading for our publisher and James would focus on booking the tour and doing publicity.

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For those of us who aren't full-time writers, I highly recommend forming writing groups or considering co-authorship. Academics have reviewers and committees, we have our own informal networks and this is what is pushing our work to be its best.

For more information about *Hillbilly Nationalists*, *Urban Race Rebels*, and *Black Power* and the authors visit them online at:

<http://sonnieandtracybook.com>

Matt Dineen lives in Philadelphia where he writes and volunteers at [Wooden Shoe Books](#) . His essay

*[More Than a Symbolic Gesture: Occupy Wall Street and the Rise of the American Autumn](#) appeared on *Toward Freedom in October*. Contact him at [passionsandsurvival\(at\)gmail\(dot\)com](mailto:passionsandsurvival(at)gmail(dot)com)*