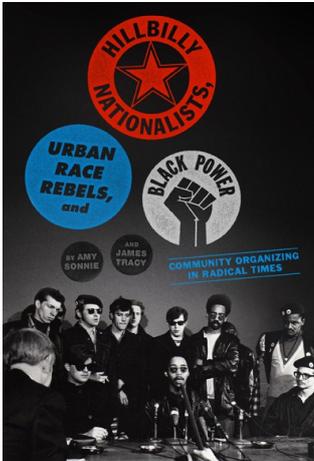


Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power

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Hillbilly Nationalists: Authors' Reflections



*Here, authors Amy Sonnie and James Tracy discuss their forthcoming book, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times*, which explores radical organizing among working-class white communities during the 1960s-1970s (now available for [pre-order](#)).*

Amy Sonnie is an activist, educator and librarian who has worked with U.S. grassroots social justice movements for the past 17 years. She is co-founder of the national Center for Media Justice.

James Tracy is a long-time social justice organizer in the San Francisco Bay Area. He is the founder of the San Francisco Community Land Trust and has been active in the Eviction Defense Network and the Coalition On Homelessness, SF.



Let's start with the basics. Can you give us a brief summary of what *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power* is about?

Amy Sonnie (AS): The book shares the stories of poor and working-class whites who found common cause with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the Sixties and Seventies. They organized in white slums and industrial centers, and they also evolved a version of feminism relevant to poor women's lives. In Chicago, we look at JOIN Community Union, The Young Patriots and Rising Up Angry; in Philadelphia's Kensington neighborhood we share the story of October 4th Organization; and in the Bronx we introduce White Lightning. Together they represent a kind of "political family tree," unique but influenced by each others' work.

Some of the groups shared members, and we tell their organizational stories through the lens of their leaders and participants. Some were in well-known groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), but most of these organizations and individuals have never been written about. Many people have heard of the Young Patriots – poor whites from Appalachia – who formed an alliance with the Black Panthers and Young Lords called the Rainbow Coalition. But we asked, "How did the Rainbow Coalition come to be?" The book takes a longer view of the "rainbow politics" that inspired that alliance and that continued even after government repression decimated groups like the Panthers and Patriots.

Why did you two decide to write this book?

James Tracy (JT): We were both working on this research, but separately. After a mutual friend let us know about each other's work, I called and begged Amy to team up. For me, there were several reasons why this made sense. I grew up in Vallejo, a town just north of San Francisco. When the shipyards closed, right-wing groups such as White Aryan Resistance showed up, trying to convince white workers that blacks and immigrants were the cause of their job loss. This was the infamous "Aryan Woodstock" media circus of 1989. I noticed that a lot of left-wing groups showed up in town — protesting and pamphleting — but few were ready to stick around for the long-term. It was a missed opportunity. It could have been an entirely different deal if there had been conscious, sustained organizing around both jobs and defeating racism. But in almost every community that the left decides to jettison, the right is more than happy to move in with easy answers.

Years later, I found out about the Young Patriots Organization through Malik Rahim, a former Black Panther who I worked with in the Eviction Defense Network in San Francisco. Originally, I intended to write a magazine article about them, but – through interviews and research – I found out that there were other similar groups. For the most part, if these groups have been written about at all, it has only been in the footnotes of books about the Black Panthers and Young Lords. It was time for this part of the story to be told.

AS: James is right. He did beg me! I was working two, sometimes three, jobs at the time. So I was hesitant about taking this on. Writing this history seemed too important to pass up though. I had been researching JOIN and the Young Patriots since late 1999 when I presented their work as an example of class-based antiracist organizing for a study group in San Francisco. By studying their example of working-class radicalism, I was trying to reconcile some of the classism I had experienced in the Left. I think we're all familiar with the common assumption that poor and working-class white people are inherently more racist. Beyond the arrogance and inaccuracy of these ideas, I always found this logic politically lazy. Nothing about racialized capitalism is that simple. Researching these groups was a way to uncover a more complicated story, one that offers both lessons and hope for the kind of movement we need. I didn't find answers, of course, but I was inspired by the way these organizations carved out a place for poor and working-class whites as radical actors, not bystanders, at a time of massive social upheaval. The more people I interviewed, the more I was inspired to tell their story.

Can you tell us a couple of stories of struggles that inspired or surprised you?

AS: I can share two examples. Personally, I was most moved by getting to know Peggy Terry and her family. Peggy was a southern-born migrant worker who moved to Chicago in the late Fifties. She got involved with the civil rights movement but she also struggled to see herself as a leader, even as she was running for vice president in 1968 to challenge Alabama Gov. George Wallace for the allegiance of white working-class voters. Wallace, of course, made history that year as a third-party candidate earning 14 percent of the national vote. More than 40 percent of that support came from outside his base the South. He was the first independent-party candidate to emerge from the Right since the 1850s, but Peggy's campaign on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket — with Eldridge Cleaver — grew from a much longer tradition of progressive populism in the U.S. Still, she struggled. I spent years with her writing, journals and getting to know her family. I admired her. She met people where they were at, and she modeled a way of being an intellectual that had nothing to do with formal education. We share one story in the book where Peggy sits down with a poor white family that is hesitant about joining the movement because they heard it was all about giving things up for the revolution. Her reply cut through their fears when she told them the movement wasn't about giving things up; it was about making more so that everyone could live in dignity. She demonstrated that the Left has vision – not just oppositional politics – which we can learn from today.

From an organizing standpoint, I was also inspired by the anti-war work these groups did at the community level. Rising Up Angry in Chicago organized Vietnam veterans and their families. They engaged people in a conversation about U.S. imperialism while acknowledging that both draftees and voluntary servicemembers faced complex choices. People enlisted or accepted the draft out of a mix of economic desperation and patriotism. Angry's organizers created a culture of dialogue and action around both G.I. rights and anti-imperialism. Similarly, October 4th Organization organized a community blood drive after the U.S. bombed a hospital in Bach Mai. Hundreds of people participated. These were the same families who'd lost their sons in the war. The local public school in North Philly had the highest casualty rate for a student body in the entire country. Actions like these made the Left relevant to people's deeply felt beliefs and gave them something to do with their grief and anger.

JT: One story that blows me away every time I think about it is how Chuck Armsbury, a member of the Patriots, basically the Original Rainbow Coalition's spirit inside federal prison and built unity across racial lines in the penitentiary. Another inspiring story is when Rising Up Angry had to deal with the fact that some of the young white men whom they were organizing were being drawn into a gang fight against Black youth. They were able to negotiate a truce between the groups. Those

kinds of results are only possible when organizers have grown strong roots in a community. Given the pointed debates about what was “radical” at the time, I wonder how many people recognized the significance of this. It was just as profound as any organizing victory.

What were the main lessons that emerged out of these histories?

JT: Fred Hampton said “Power wherever there’s people,” which means organize everywhere there’s justice to be built. At the heart of the matter, the lessons are pretty simple: The future is unwritten, so don’t give your self over to ideas of political predestination. It’s a pessimistic trap to think that any one group is born progressive or reactionary. Consciousness is not only shaped by conditions, but by those committed to organizing for the long haul.

AS: The main thing these groups asserted, and I agree, is that there is as much progressive spirit among poor and working-class whites as there is among the middle class, and likely more than there is among the very wealthy who have the biggest stake in capitalism. And yet organizing among working-class whites requires both serious working-class leadership and acknowledgment among the Left that there are unique conditions in those communities, both materially and psychologically. The radical potential in their communities was largely dismissed then, and this view persists in the historical canon on the 1960s. When it comes to the era’s white radicalism most people think of SDS and the armed insurrection of the Weather Underground. Far less attention has been paid to the factory organizing of groups like Revolutionary Youth Movement II, or the neighborhood organizing of the groups we write about.

A lesson that emerges in tandem, and core to this book, is that racial justice needs to be central to any working-class organizing or else the structures of racism that exist in all communities will threaten real progress. For these five groups, racial justice meant ongoing education and deliberate, direct organizing that brought people into coalitions with communities of color. They formed partnerships with the Third World Women’s Alliance, the Panthers, the Young Lords and The Woodlawn Organization, among others. For this to work, each of the organizations needed to be strong in their own way. Organizers built bridges between communities by taking on shared concerns — unemployment, poverty, displacement, police violence, fair housing — as the basis of common cause. Throughout the book, there are lessons about how individual consciousness grows; how class, race and gender issues can fracture organizations; how alliances are built when the gulf between communities seems insurmountable; how easily these same alliances fall apart when internal and external forces unbalance the scales.

The Tea Party has clearly tried to claim that they represent the interests and views of poor and working class white people. How accurate do you think that claim is? Do you think that radicals today should engage in a struggle to work with and win over poor and working class white people, or is that a hopeless battle at this point? If so, what should that work look like?

AS: First, I’d reframe the second part of this question. We should be asking how the Left can change to be more relevant and participatory, not whether a class of people is beyond change. This is the trap some Sixties radicals fell into, and it’s this exact question these five groups confronted. They were “rising up angry” against Left elitism as much as they were against capitalism. When I talk to working-class folks outside the Left today, I often hear the same frustrations. We need to spend time sitting at people tables, listening, framing visionary campaigns and demonstrating the values of the Left. Here, we need both the kind of [transformative communications](#) Jen Soriano outlined in her post for OrgUp earlier this year, and strong organizations that emphasize real alternatives to poverty, injustice and corporate control.

What does this work look like? I think organizations like Vermont Workers Center, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, the Center for New Community, and the Right to the City Alliance, among others, are figuring that out. Each in their own way. I also think there is a need to bring anxiously employed public workers into coalitions with traditionally excluded workers and the long-term unemployed as well. As a public employee myself, this is where I am most energized.

Second, let's clear up the fact that the Tea Party did not emerge from the working class, and its leaders actually claim to speak for the nation's somehow-more-noble middle class. A quick look at speeches of key leaders makes clear that the Tea Party would dismantle virtually every institution that benefits the poor and working families, in part because they feel the federal government gives more to the poor than it does to the wealthy and middle class. Ask anyone living on general assistance or SSI at \$440/month if this is true, and they will laugh. However, it is a mistake to dismiss the Tea Party with the simple accusation that they are just wealthy white folks protecting their privilege. This upswell is the newest example of white nationalism and nativism, and historically we've seen that this extremism can narrow the frame of public debate in very dangerous ways. This kind of right-wing populism can sway even well-meaning liberal politicians to roll back basic civil and human rights. The terrain of acceptable ideas is narrowing. I think the most important things radicals today can do today are to study the history of the Right, to keep working at the community level to point out the obvious contradictions in Tea Party rhetoric and do what we can to widen the frame of debate in the media. I'll let James chime in here, too.

JT: The Tea Party's message is nothing new, it's a refined version of what politicians like Barry Goldwater and George Wallace were saying in the 1960s. It's the argument, that if communities of color make progress, whites will suffer. If you are white, and you have very little to begin with, this message easily resonates. The reason for this isn't stupidity or even simplistic explanations of racism. The Right always uses social reforms very strategically to reinforce this, and decimate opportunities for unity. The Black Panther Party demanded "full employment," the Nixon administration delivered Affirmative Action. Conservative politicians like Frank Rizzo in Philadelphia then built their political careers whipping up white workers' fear that Affirmative Action took jobs away from deserving whites.

In my view, the Tea Party doesn't represent anyone's real needs and desires, they only represent fears of losing what little you have. Left-wing radicals who want to take the easy way out and just declare a massive part of society unorganizable in a progressive direction are doing the Tea Party a big favor. That does not mean we abandon the fight against 21st century racism. It means we need to intensify it. But it also means that we have to be bold about talking about class again, and weaving other areas that are traditionally understood as "identity politics" into those class politics. But the bottom line is that, whatever groups the Left decides are "unorganizable," the Right will embrace and organize.

I think that several good examples of this kind of bold organizing already exist today. Bring the Ruckus in Oregon has bravely outreached at gun shows, urging mostly white attendees to question anti-immigrant hysteria. The anti-mountain top removal struggle in Appalachia is one of the most important organizing drives today. Iraq Veterans Against the War carries on the tradition of GI dissidents. These things that are only "exceptional" because they are easily discounted or under reported.

What lessons can we draw from these histories about the use of populism – in its left and right variants?

JT: Populism grows when there is a crisis of legitimacy of the current political or economic order. I like to think of a crisis as a moment in time when social ills are no longer confined to those who have always been at the bottom of the well. During the Great Depression, the United States saw dramatic and important collaborations between white and Black workers. The Unemployed Workers Movement, the CPUSA's very principled support of the Scottsboro defendants, and the Bonus Marcher's occupation of Washington, D.C. are all good examples. These positive, progressive moments existed at the exact same time in history when the U.S. had an active movement in solidarity with Nazi Germany, the possibility of armed right-wing coup against Roosevelt, and an extremely empowered Klan. So if you are an organizer, ask yourself: What kind of populist moment do you want to live through? One where the racists are the sole interpreters of the crisis, or one where solidarity has a fighting chance?

Today, just about everyone agrees that there is a crisis. The Right is using the opportunity to blame

immigrants, the poor, queers and just about anyone else. The Left tries to frame the crisis in political and economic terms, blaming the Right. Or, in other terms, the populist Left blames the people who were at the table when the latest job-killing and planet-killing trade treaty was signed. The populist Right blames the people who had to clean up the table after the treaty was signed. There's really only one lesson here: Step outside of your comfort zone and organize. Organize, and explain who the forces are that are actually keeping us from moving forward. Guilt tripping and unsophisticated interpretations of white privilege theory can't convince anyone to break through assumptions that have been built into their minds for decades.

Reflecting on this history, what do you feel are the main tasks facing radicals today, particularly as it relates to white working class communities?

AS: Be creative. Learn from histories like this. Remember that organizing is about creating opportunities for action, not about arriving where the conditions are already perfect. These organizations grew where conditions seemed most challenging, and they found ways to connect both local and global issues. I think this is instructive for organizers today. We need to be thinking globally and historically, not only about the challenges we face but also about the potential for a globalized Left. Within the U.S. right now, it's easy to feel pessimistic. But, on a world scale, we are in a moment of possibilities born of a wide recognition that things will get much worse if we do not intervene now in climate change, in resource privatization, in support of poor people's movements. The World Social Forum process shows us this kind of possibility. And in the U.S., we need to do more to open avenues for participation in these assemblies among working-class communities.

Take the 99ers, for example. The term refers to workers who have maxed out their 99 weeks of unemployment benefits. A loose national network has sprung up, with people talking about short-term policy change to extend unemployment benefits, about civil disobedience, and also about the impact of joblessness on mental health. In a Twitter forum last Spring (nicely [recapped](#) by America What Went Wrong?), impacted workers talked about being inspired by Wisconsin and the uprising in Egypt. So what happens now? Is a short-term extension of benefits really the only solution on the table? Who is ready for the visionary organizing needed to bring together these formerly secure workers now facing poverty and young people who are looking at a future of chronic unemployment as well? Only 30% of U.S. residents have a college degree and the most likely potential for job growth is in skilled professions that require a degree. We're looking at structural unemployment and we need to respond to this permanent economic insecurity for a working-class majority, of all races. Young people of color and low-income whites who cannot afford higher education will bear the brunt of this. And on the flip side, formerly secure workers are seeing their futures slip away. The system that once worked for them has failed them, but they may also hold out hope that the system will rebound in their favor. How do we organize around job creation, job training and access to education in ways that address persistent racial disparities while affirming the immediate needs and human rights of all workers? This is a question for both progressive labor as well as for community organizers. We know long-term unemployment is disproportionately higher in communities of color, but the anger and depression this creates among out-of-work whites is no less real. One of the tasks for radicals, and specifically white radicals, is to commit ourselves to long-term organizing that highlights unity and confronts scapegoating wherever we live. It is really the only way forward.

In a broader sense, I think the question is whether enough of today's radicals are willing to work through these kinds of contradictions. As Grace Lee Boggs reminds young activists, we need to keep thinking dialectically. We need to continue demonstrating that hope and dignity come from collective action. This means listening to people's fears and addressing them, rather than telling people that their desire for security is some vulgar manifestation of privilege. As movements, we need to think about our work and our goals in terms of years and even decades, not in terms of weeks. The groups we write about in *Hillbilly Nationalists* asserted this, and many of them are still involved in progressive work today. Today, it has become even more important that we think long term. The Tea Party may win elections, but – when I look globally – I feel less cynical about the potential for Left movement. I think about the vision we are seeing, for instance, in parts of Latin America. In the U.S. we need to understand our work as part of a world historical movement. And

we need to strengthen our connections to it.

JT: White supremacy is a bill of goods sold like snake oil to all white people who grow up in the United States. So why then are the whites who benefit the least from this system given the lion's share of blame for racism? Why not start at the top, with those who profit from disunity, then work on down the class line? I understand that the idea of a psychological wage of whiteness, but it's always written on a bad check. Over the past few decades, the idea of "White Skin Privilege" has been watered down and mutated. Profound thinkers like W.E.B. DuBois, Ted Allen and Noel Ignatiev (and the rest of Sojourner Truth Organization) recognized it as a rich man's strategy for control. Today, it's framed as a dialogue about individual choices and invisible backpacks — the realm of workshops and guilt-based politics. This leads straight to a class-blind approach to upending racism, and that is a political dead-end. Poor whites didn't create racism. At worst, some have embraced it because truly relevant multi-racial organizing has been absent in this country for decades. But it's absurd to argue that a whole section of society is hopelessly racist, and what's more, devoid of any right to raise their own issue. This isn't to deny real advantages that white workers enjoy, but those advantages don't automatically translate to their "unorganizability."

One thing that is profoundly different today is that that corporate America and the politicians are eliminating many of the historic economic advantages that have given to portions of the white working-class. Good union jobs? Largely gone. Secure mortgages? Dead as a doornail. Chance to send your kids to college with a little hard work? Good luck. This shrinking of this social contract creates mercurial rage. But where the rage gets directed depends on who is doing the organizing and who is explaining the context.

We know from history that there are dozens of times when racism has destroyed the possibility of class unity across racial lines. The book *Reluctant Reformers* documents this perfectly. However, we have plenty of examples from history of moments when organized working-class whites haven't chosen short-term advantages over people of color and undermined their movements, such as the Molly McGuires. The Industrial Workers of the World tackled race better than most organizations at the time. Carl Braden was a working-class southerner who, along with Anne Braden, organized the Southern Student Organizing Committee. The Black Panthers explicitly admired many of these groups. The list can go on, and the question always goes back to what the Left is going to do to turn the tide.