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**A Portrait of Authenticity:  
A Review of *The Admirable Radical: Staughton Lynd and Cold War  
Dissent, 1945-1970* (Kent University Press, 2010)**

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The title of Carl Mirra's biography, "The Admirable Radical," comes from Staughton Lynd's description of Henry David Thoreau in a 1963 *Liberation* journal article. Mirra describes his text as a "preliminary biography," from 1945-1970, of a "steadfast long-distance runner." He first met Lynd at the 2004 meeting of the American Historical Association, attending a session in which Lynd was a panelist. My first meeting with Lynd occurred in a similar circumstance, coincidentally, meeting him for the first time at the annual Rouge Forum conference in 2009. It seems we have both been impacted by this social justice marathoner.

In the opening pages, Mirra provides an honest discussion of his admiration of Lynd. "What makes Lynd an attractive figure is his authenticity" (p. 3). This leads Mirra to worry that, instead of biography, he may engage in a hagiography of hero worship. To this end Mirra admits, "In the interest of full disclosure, I must state that I share many of Lynd's political views and decided to write this biography in part to accent America's radical tradition" (p. 3). Likewise enamored by Lynd, this reviewer discloses that, at times, it was so easy to get caught up in the story of Lynd, that it was simple to forget my role in offering a constructive critique of Mirra's work. Hopefully, this speaks more to the skillful biography provided by Mirra than my own shortcomings. Mirra's discussions and research lead to a rich portrait and deeply contextual exploration of Lynd's early career and ongoing beliefs in action. The biography is a potent history illustrating the complexity of the movements (civil rights, radical historians, labor) and the time period, revealing that "Lynd's lifelong commitment to radical causes is contagious" (p. 5).

Mirra breaks the biography down into eight chapters, beginning with Lynd's education and time at the Macedonia Community Cooperative and moving to his time at Spellman College and Columbia University in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three Mirra delves into Freedom Summer and the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. Chapters Four and Five treat Lynd's anti-war activity in the mid to late 1960s. These chapters resolve themselves in Chapter Six with an in-depth discussion of Lynd's departure from Yale and subsequent "blacklisting." Also providing some detail of his work as a radical historian in

the American Historical Association (AHA) in Chapter Seven, Mirra concludes his biography in Chapter Eight noting that Lynd is “still carrying the banner.”

According to Mirra, Lynd’s worldview is driven by: the right to rebel, committed action, and horizontal decision-making. Similarly, Lynd’s political philosophy and activism encompasses decentralization, non-violence, democracy, direct action, and the unity of theory and practice. These are summarized in a way that “loosely matches” Zapatista strategies, namely: the right to revolution among the oppressed, the placement of human needs before property rights, and that freedom is determined by the degree to which people make decisions for themselves (pp. 8-9). Once articulated, Mirra uses these concepts as elements that recycle themselves throughout the text and provide a tight threading that ties together his history and the story of Lynd. To make clear the pattern for such a threading, Mirra argues, “Lynd’s life and intellectual pursuits can be understood as striving to discover the answer on how to construct a qualitatively new social order” (p. 7).

Toward the ends of understanding Lynd and the potential of this qualitatively new social order, I found myself taking notes around 4 themes which merged some of, and disarticulated other aspects of, Lynd’s philosophy and worldview. Mirra’s telling of Lynd’s early activism and work helped deepen my knowledge and enlighten my spirit along these themes: (1) the struggle around Burnham’s Dilemma, (2) participatory democracy and horizontal planning vs. centralized bureaucracy and vertical power, (3) praxis, and (4) the right to revolution.

### **Burnham’s Dilemma**

In the introduction, Mirra describes what Lynd calls Burnham’s (1941) dilemma: “Burnham argued that the transition from feudalism to capitalism evolved gradually throughout Europe. ... Over time, these piecemeal actions developed within the ‘shell of the old’ system to create something entirely new. The problem ... was that a socialist theory could not evolve similarly out of the womb of capitalism” (p. 7). Lynd’s wrestling, then, is informative for all of us who seek that “qualitatively new social order.” This dilemma and Lynd’s struggle are brought into sharper relief throughout Mirra’s biography, but are most poignantly portrayed through his coverage/discussion of the 1964 Atlantic City Democratic National Convention, Lynd’s blacklisting from Yale, and his challenges within the American Historical Association.

Regarding the Atlantic City convention, Mirra sets the stage of possibility by describing the work of Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) [which, compared to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), was more decentralized in its leadership] and Freedom Summer. These more local and grassroots efforts were frustrated at the convention, leading Mirra to conclude, “Large organizations such as the Democratic Party, unions, and even some civil rights groups often made concessions to the status quo, thereby limiting their ability to contribute to a new social order based on equality” (p. 64). Mirra further observes relative to Burnham’s dilemma, “For Lynd, the Atlantic City convention signified the absolute failure of coalition-style politics and reinforced his allegiance to alternative institutions and to local organizing over national conventions” (p. 65).

Connecting to the present day, this dilemma strikes at the heart of the struggle for the future of educational policy and schooling. Shall we work within the two main teacher unions or shall we follow the more grassroots, local nature of the March 4<sup>th</sup> movement?

We can also trace this theme's threading through Mirra's in-depth discussion of Lynd's departure from Yale and his subsequent blacklisting, which made it impossible to secure a tenure track position at other colleges or universities. Mirra helps us to wonder how much change can be made within the establishment of academe. Not to presume Mirra's conflicts, but as a fellow academic, I could certainly feel how deep this line of thinking/questioning cut, particularly as we enter a phase of academic capitalism in which the academy is under even greater assault by the corporate sector (related to research grants, the standards movement, testing, bookstores, food service, etc.). We are led to ask, can education be liberatory in such an establishment? Can freedom emerge from the shell of the old? Noting the deep complexity of the dilemma and the academic enterprise, Andrej Grubic, in a conversation with Lynd in *Wobblies and Zapatistas* wonders, (2008), "Are universities not an important site of struggle? If we are all only on the barricades, who is going to write" (p. 63)? While Lynd agrees with the potential of the academy, in order to answer Grubic he nuances the position (which Mirra also illuminates), using EP Thompson as a prime example: that only if academics immerse themselves in society and struggle alongside the oppressed, marginalized, and disenfranchised.

This sentiment of immersion naturally lends itself to the concept of "guerilla history," which Lynd, in *Wobblies and Zaptistas*, describes as a history that "begins with the situation of the worker, the prisoner, or whoever the poor or oppressed person is in a particular decision, not with the existential dilemma of the radical intellectual" (p. 119). Likewise, in a chapter provocatively titled, "Guerilla Historians Combats the American Historical Association," Mirra neatly describes the radicalism that Lynd attempts to inject in the AHA. Encapsulating the struggle, Mirra offers, "Lynd, now blacklisted from the profession, argued that the university was an unlikely place for genuine radicalism, much less revolution. He contended that university life socializes ('corrupts') the individual, and by extension the scholarship each produces" (p. 152).

### **Participatory democracy and horizontal planning vs. centralized bureaucracy and positions of "neutrality"**

There are connections to Burnham's Dilemma here to be certain. And, it is important to point out the close link Mirra draws to non-violent direct action in terms of this sort of democracy and planning. Mirra nicely sets up this theme early in the text when he notes, "Lynd's non-violent moral compass enables us all to keep track of our humanity as we resist illegitimate authority" (p. 9). I was reminded here of a text that Lynd recommends reading in other writing, *Bread and Wine* (Silone, 1936/1955), which is written in the 1930s and set in fascist Italy. The main character, Pietro Spina, on the topic of resisting illegitimate authority, demands,

Freedom is not something you get as a present. You can live free in a dictatorship under one condition: that you fight the dictatorship. The person who thinks with his or her own mind and keeps it uncorrupted is

free. The person who fights for what he or she thinks is right is free. But, you can live in the most democratic country on earth and if you are lazy, obtuse or servile within yourself, you are not free. Even without violent coercion, you're a slave. You can't beg your freedom from someone. You have to seize it—everyone as much as they can. (p. 43)

Freedom Summer is an obvious example of such seizure and demonstrates Lynd's liberation spirituality. As well it offers an example of Lynd's desire for horizontal planning and a more participatory democracy, noting again that SNCC was different from the NAACP and the SCLC based on its local, decentralized leadership.

Lynd's hope in such decentralized leadership would be challenged, of course, at the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. In fact, it was nearly wiped out. Mirra offers some keen analysis:

Lynd's abhorrence of alliances with the liberal establishment is not a stubborn theoretical dispute but a reflection of the disillusionment of how such coalitions decimated the hopes of many Mississippi freedom fighters. He saw a flash of a new society and agonized as he watched these flickers of hope dampen. (p. 70)

The 1964 convention demonstrated how coalition politics can kill a movement by subsuming it under its platform. Mirra provides further fine examination of the two sides, pitting Lynd's philosophy against that of Bayard Rustin's who held that "movement leaders must be willing to make deals with the administration that might seem harmful in the short term but that hold the capacity for greater long-term change" (p. 70). To retort, Mirra observes, "Lynd argued that a coalition with the establishment would limit the degree to which blacks might achieve equality and genuine democratic control over their own lives" (p. 71). It seems that Lynd was correct. Such politics and vision leads Mirra to conclude, "While the year 1964 should not be cast as an absolute moral dividing line, it is indisputably a significant fault line in the tremors between participatory democracy and coalition politics" (p. 72).

Later, Mirra reclaims this theme when discussing Lynd's work with the Youngstown steelworkers and noting the trend toward collective bargaining and away from strikes. Lynd, of course, instead, favored "horizontal organizing," which he writes about in *Living Inside Our Hope* (1997), "Horizontal organizing is organizing on the basis of labor solidarity: it is relying not on technical expertise, nor on numbers of signed-up members, nor yet on a bureaucratic chain of command, but on the spark that leaps from person to person, especially in times of common crisis" (p. 204). In his discussion of Lynd's work with unions, Mirra suggests, "Once again, Lynd rejects such vertical decision-making, fighting instead for horizontal networks of direct action and local control" (p. 169).

As well, Mirra riffs along this theme in his chapter, entitled "Blacklisted," in which he pits the New Left and radical historians against the liberal establishment. Lynd's sort of combination of activism and scholarship was intended to provide a "historical foundation for the participatory politics of the New Left" (p. 130). Attempting to locate the origins of this New Left and his continued desire for a more participatory democracy, Mirra properly concludes this chapter drawing a connection back to both SNCC and the 1964 convention:

Lynd does not locate the origins of the New Left in SDS [the Students for a Democratic Society] or the student movement, tracing it instead to the spontaneous, self-governing institutions of the civil rights movement during the 1950s. This local “participatory democracy” took a fatal blow at Atlantic City in 1964; democratic centralism crippled these self-governing bodies. After this, SNCC moved away from a circle of love to black power and, no matter how justified that shift may have been, it led to a centralized political style that militated against prefigurative politics. . . . As the literal decade of the 1960s came to a close, it became increasingly difficult for Lynd to envision the expansion of the participatory democracy he hoped for. . . . [H]is restless search for local, self governing institutions [however] would persist throughout the 1970s and beyond (p. 149).

## Praxis

Again, Freedom Summer is described as what embodies Lynd’s liberation spirituality. Connected to Freire’s and Gutierrez’s work on the concept of praxis, the twinning of theory and practice, as well as Marx’s critique of the 11<sup>th</sup> thesis of Feuerbach (that the work of philosophers is not solely interpretation, but transformation, too), Mirra facilely illustrates Lynd’s praxis throughout the text. Whether that is Freedom Summer, Lynd’s trip to Hanoi in December, 1965 or his radicalism within the AHA, Mirra provides ample coverage of how Lynd merges theory with practice. Regarding Freedom Summer, and connected to the concept of participatory democracy, Mirra states,

Lynd’s time in Freedom Summer ... represents a glimpse of what is possible. There is much chatter among radical intellectuals about combining theory and practice. In evaluating Lynd’s sometimes recalcitrant insistence that he distrusts centralized organizations, the degree to which Freedom Summer and its denouement at Atlantic City molded this stance must be considered (p. 70).

Mirra also offers, “Genuine scholarship ... is a critical reflection on praxis. True learning is not found in the library alone, but in one’s socially engaged experience, which guides one’s scholarly direction” (p. 152).

Clearly, Lynd is an example of the embodiment of praxis. He taught who he was and lived what he taught. Mirra provides a plethora of examples and evidence for scholars to use as a model for how our work ought to be conducted.

This theme, in fact, is found throughout Lynd’s work. I was reminded of a couple of passages from *Living Inside Our Hope*, in which Lynd speaks of both mindful activism, “putting your body where your mouth is” (p. 2), and the possibilities of accompaniment:

[T]o throw in one’s lot with poor and working people, it was not necessary to sell all one had or give it away, and try to become like the people one wished to help. Another way to do it might be to acquire some skill like doctoring and then live in a working class community without pretending to be a steelworker or a meatpacker (p. 22).

While I originally gleaned the concept of praxis from Freire (1970). Lynd provides an authentic model of *living* praxis, as told through the lens of Mirra.

### **The right to revolution**

According to Mirra, “Lynd did not envision revolution as a single, ‘unitary’ event, but as a series of small steps that shifted authority to local communities” (p. 86). Indeed, this right is intimately linked to horizontal planning and democratic partnering. As well, this right emerges as a response/possibility to Burnham’s dilemma.

Lynd’s concluding comment in *Wobblies and Zapatistas*, draws a link between Burnham’s dilemma and the right to revolution, “imagining a transition that will not culminate in a single apocalyptic moment but rather express itself in unending creation of self-acting entities that are horizontally linked” (241). Continuing, Lynd concludes, “My strongest wish for the new Movement is that individuals will find it more and more possible to reconcile, to find common ground, to prefigure another world in a way that we relate to each other. That process is the inwardness of nonviolence. What is essential is the wanting and the seeking” (p. 241). Mirra captures this essence, again, in his coverage of Freedom Summer, linking it to a “pedagogy of the oppressed” (which would be published 6 years later by Paulo Freire) and illuminating what this right to revolution looked like in action. Interestingly, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* lies at the center of the ethnic studies controversy in Arizona. Critics argue that such a text is anti-American and claim that it urges the overthrow of the state. Mirra provides a parallel depiction, really, of how dangerous the Freedom Summer curriculum must have been to the establishment in the mid-1960s.

In fact, during his keynote address at the Rouge Forum conference in 2009, Lynd elaborated on the revolutionary nature of this curriculum in his address, entitled, “What is to be done?” Specifically, he took this experience 45 years prior to talk about the need for continued “self-acting entities” like Freedom Schools to “prefigure another [transformed] world,” concluding,

Every school a Freedom School, because this may be the one time and place, the one island of experience when youngsters experience the possibility of taking seriously ideas and ideals. Every school a Freedom School, because the military is raiding inner city public schools to recruit for its imperialist wars and we have a duty to help our students resist. ... Every school a Freedom School, because even for those who make it through high school it is very difficult to find a decent job and young people will need whatever inner resources we can help them to develop before graduation. ... Every school a Freedom School because: If not now, then when? If not here, then where? If not ourselves, then who?

Reviewing this address and seeing the linkage Mirra draws between Lynd and Freire, I was also led to consider what a conversation between Lynd and Freire would have sounded like. What sort of “we make the road by walking” could Lynd and Freire have created, similar to what emerged between Freire and Myles Horton (1997).

## For Readers of *Workplace*

Mirra's preliminary biography of Staughton Lynd should be of sufficient interest for readers of *Workplace*. Lynd, as an authentic academic and activist, is a beacon toward which all those who work on the better behalf of humanity should migrate. Mirra captures a full portrait of Lynd's life and work. It is deeply contextual and offers critical analysis.

My only critique, a small but forgivable one, enters the scene in his chapter entitled, "Blacklisted." As if retrying Lynd's tenure case at Yale, Mirra engages, perhaps, in the hagiography he wished to avoid. While the chapter contains a tightly woven argument, Mirra's voice appears more primary than it does through most of the text, even asking questions of the reader, like "Is it not reasonable to assume that these political denunciations influenced Yale's decision to deny tenure" (p. 145). The intricate way in which Mirra lays out his research, I think, removes the need for such questions. The case, to hear Mirra tell it, is clear enough. And, those of us in academe are familiar with such a scenario. But, again, this critique pales in comparison to the story Mirra offers his readers. My hope is that Mirra is already working on part II of this story: 1970-present (though, from the footnotes, it seems someone may already be working on such a biography). And, indeed, Lynd is still "carrying the banner." Mirra observes,

Lynd continues his search for solidarity and direct action into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His work in Youngstown labor struggles, trips to revolutionary Nicaragua, representation of death-row inmates, and antiwar activities are beyond the scope of this biography. However, Lynd's current activities staunchly maintain the central preoccupations of his life: his scholarly examination of the inherent inequality of the capitalist system together with his emphasis, as historian and activist, on the importance of local, communal organizing as key to a better system (p. 169).

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