

# Reviews

## EVERY SECRET THING

Patricia Campbell Hearst with Alvin Moscow

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Shortly after the kidnap of Patty Hearst, on 4 February 1974, her captors issued a tape-recorded communique, partly spoken by Patty herself, and partly by one 'General Field Marshal Cinque', who declared that 'The Western Region Adult Unit' of the 'United Federation Forces of the Symbionese Liberation Army' had arrested the 19-year-old heiress as a prisoner of war.

For those who followed such things, the existence of the SLA was not news: already there had been communiqués issued, describing the SLA as 'a United and Federated grouping of members of different races and peoples and socialist political parties of the oppressed people of the Fascist and United States of America', or as 'a United Front and Federated coalition of members from the Asian, Black, Brown, Indian, White, Woman, Grey and Gay Liberation Movements'. Shortly after the SLA's first 'combat operation', the assassination of a black schools superintendant in Oakland, the SLA's 'Western Region Youth Unit' (as opposed presumably, to the 'adult' one), claimed responsibility, and when Patty Hearst herself announced that she had voluntarily joined the SLA's forces, it was to the 'information-intelligence unit' that she was attached. And, a few weeks later, when



six SLA members perished in a bloody shoot-out with the Los Angeles police, it was announced that 'the Malcolm X Combat Unit of the Symbionese Liberation Army proudly takes up the banner of the New World Liberation Front'.

It was, of course, all nonsense. The Malcolm X Combat Unit by that stage consisted of two people, plus Patty Hearst herself. The SLA, *in toto*, at its highest point of active membership comprised one black man, two white men, and five white women. This was the Federated Front and all its units; the Youth Unit matured into the adult Unit in less than two months. Patricia Hearst's book about her experiences (written 'with Alvin Moscow') is not very illuminating on the key question of whether her participation in the SLA's activities (including two armed robberies) was genuinely voluntary: she states that, having been kept blindfold and physically abused, in a darkened closet for 57 days, she was offered the choice of walking out free or joining the 'army', and, not believing the first offer to be genuine, took up the second for her own preservation. What is highly interesting is the picture which she and her ghost writer paint of the SLA itself: the personal and moral squalor of its relationships, the unbelievable grandiosity of its aspirations (and the poverty of its real ideas), the obsession with weaponry, and the 'symbiotic' dependence of both the men and the women on a rigidly patriarchal hierarchy of 'command'.

It would be possible, of course, to shrug off the activities of the Symbionese Liberation Army, particularly as seen through the eyes of the heiress to a vast newspaper fortune. The revolutionary Left has always picked up its fair share of fantasists and psychopaths, and to see the SLA as bearing relevance to the American New Left in general would be as unfair as judging all black African states by the regime of Idi Amin.

But in fact the SLA were not alone, and if their activities were farcical, then they echoed (in the manner of the old saw) the tragedy of the American New Left as a whole. In early 1968, Students for a Democratic Society, the organisational focus of much of the anti-imperialist movement, had been strong and united enough to force the effective resignation of President Lyndon Johnson. Eighteen months later, SDS lay in pieces, splintered and shattered by a factional in-fight that led to the emergence, on the one hand, of an 'old left', workerist, Maoist sect; and, on the other, of a small, underground urban guerrilla force called Weatherman.

And the point about Weatherman (or the 'Weather Underground' as it later renamed itself, in response to charges of sexism) was that its members had not been peripheral or marginal to the mass movement: they were among the best and the brightest of those who had led the Civil Rights movement and the campaign against the Vietnam War. And although their political writings were, in terms of the sophistication of their language, obviously way above the grandiose meanings of the SLA, the two groups shared the belief that the racial minorities of the United States could, if necessary by themselves, undertake a successful revolution against four-fifths of the American population (including a stupified and bought-off white working class) and that the way to herald this revolution was to indulge in individual acts of terror, the nastier the better. Leading Weatherperson Bernadine Dohrn, for example, responded to the Charles Manson murders by commenting: 'Dig it, first they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room as them, then they even shoved a fork into a victim's stomach. Wild!' And, as Nigel Young pointed out in his book *An Infantile Disorder?*, the Weather Underground, like the SLA-four years later, 'created an irrational caricature of the relationships in the larger society; insensitive to the needs of individuals, riven by aggressive rivalry, dominated by hierarchies that used threats and coercion to maintain themselves'.

How could it have gone so desperately wrong? SDS had emerged to national attention, in the early 60s, with a manifesto (the Port Huron statement) which anticipated many of the concerns of the early 80s: rejecting the rigidity of the centralised, vanguard party, and the determinism of the economic base, it posited a politics which started from the personal, and which emphasised the vital importance of culture (particularly, the sterility of the mass consumption society) in stunting the real potentialities of the mass of the people. Further, the New Left did not share the old Left's hostility towards the individual, moral impulse in politics: it believed firmly that the outcome of the revolution was present in the means of its making. Perhaps such an open, innocent statement could only have been made in America, where the McCarthy witch-hunts have effectively wiped the left slate clean, and left a generation for whom everything was fresh and yet-to-be-discovered. Certainly, the generosity and libertarianism of Port Huron allowed SDS to play an active and leading role in both the Civil Rights and anti-war movements; it allowed radicals and

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revolutionaries sufficient space to take on board the concerns and life-style of the growing youth counter-culture.

But, ultimately, the New Left was not new enough. Its opponents joked that what was left about it wasn't new, and what was new about it wasn't left, and while the latter statement was fallacious, the former was at least half true. Woven into the fabric, invisible within the brightness of its coat of many colours, older strands remained. And when the full force of the state was hammered down on to the heads of the anti-war and black liberation movements — particularly after Richard Nixon's election — the old organisational imperatives of Leninism combined with the New Left's own hidden determinism and elitism to create a network of tiny, conspiratorial vanguards, of a tightness and zeal that might have frightened the Bolsheviks themselves.

For, if the concept that all human activity flows smoothly from relations at the economic base was determinist, how much more so was the idea that the entire white working class had been bought off, sucked in and swallowed up by corporate control of the means of consumption? If the old Left was elitist in believing that it alone could penetrate the con-trick of capitalism, and lead the masses to self-consciousness, how much more elitist had a revolutionary to be, when that con-trick had not only militarised the labour process and corrupted the polity, but had also polluted the most intimate areas of social and personal life? And when, moreover, the particular masses to be mobilised were either economically and geographically disparate, or, even more crucially, *in the minority*?

In other words, the application of materialist models of ideology and organisation to a politics based in personal life led the New Left in the late 60s into a maze of political contradictions, and some philosophical ones as well. If RD Laing and other existentialist psychiatrists had trouble in defining the nature of the 'true', individual personality (before it had been corrupted and twisted by the family), then the New Left had even greater problems in locating the 'real' collective personality, underneath all the grime and dirt of the consumer spectacle. 'False consciousness' was an altogether too feeble description of the condition of the masses in the age of the electric toothbrush and the vaginal deodorant; only the most rigorous shock-tactics, the most extreme psychic destruction and reassembly, could unlock the 'true' but hidden revolutionary impulse underneath.

Again, directly to relate the transforma-

tion of Patty Hearst — locked in a closet, bombarded with noise, denied all outside contact, sexually abused — with the political re-creation of the Weather Underground would be a gross and unfair analogy. But her description (confirmed by others) of the daily life of the *rest* of the SLA — the constant harangues from the 'leader', the refusal of any modicum of privacy, the perpetual 'military training', the corrosive fury of all personal relations — does compare with what went on in the closed Weather-communities in the summer of 1969, as the ex-student radicals attempted to purge the white pig within themselves, in order to emerge as pure and gleaming tools of the revolution; a honing down that was — and could only — be effected by the constant, collective use of the very moral strength, and sense of individual anger at injustice, that had brought them into a new kind of politics all those years before.

The way that the spirit of the early New Left mutated into a crazy world of fantasy and terror — with, it should be said, all possible help from the repressive forces of the state itself — is a cautionary tale. It is not an argument against libertarianism, as such, but it does undermine the idea that the laws which apply to traditional revolutionary organisations somehow cease to operate when the agency of change is no longer confined to the industrial working class. Before her ordeal, Patty Hearst was a mild radical, typical of her generation. Now she describes herself as a conservative (and an anti-feminist conservative to boot). Both her class origins and her terrible experiences make her totally exceptional. But how many of the millions of Vietnam-generation Americans who voted for Ronald Reagan had, after an initial enthusiasm for radical or even revolu-



tionary politics, been excluded and finally repelled by what the New Left eventually became?

When the SLA — or, strictly speaking, its information-intelligence unit — first removed their captive's blindfold, a strange little conversation took place. Seeing only eight people, Patty Hearst asked, not unreasonably, where all the other units were. The General Field-Marshal burst out laughing.. 'What other units?', he asked her. 'This is all there is, baby. We're the whole army. You're looking at it.' The sad truth is that, in all probability, that's just the way they wanted it to be.

**David Edgar**