“A just and secure world.” In this increasingly unjust and insecure world, what irony there is in this title! As Amy C. Schneidhorst points out in the conclusion to *Building a Just and Secure World*, in the face of today's unceasing wars and massive government surveillance, the peace movement needs the dedication of mature activist women, like the women of Chicago from the 1960s whose work she describes in this densely detailed book. It is a book difficult to summarize but valuable for the light it throws on a little-known facet of the Vietnam era, the contributions of mature adult women to the peace movement in Chicago. Too often this midwestern megalopolis is remembered only for the drama in the streets during the 1968 Democratic Convention. Schneidhorst gives us much more, and in the process challenges the dominant 1960s story of generational divide.

The women she chronicles are adults who were not silent in the “silent 50s”; they were educated and organized. Most of them were married, many of them were mothers, and many of them were also workers whose views differed from those of their professional colleagues. They continued to work through the period under consideration, addressing issues of U.S. war making and racial policies on local, national, and international fronts. Younger civilly disobedient activists like Jane Kennedy may not have worked directly with these women but they learned from them, learned particularly of their steadfastness.

The sexism in the larger society at the time is a given, particularly Mayor Richard Daley's corrupt Democratic political machine; what is less chronicled is the sexism so prevalent in the peace movement. One can only conclude that many of these women worked primarily through women’s organizations not only because it was the way they knew and believed in, but also because it was the only way to find a voice in a then-gendered antiwar scene. Furthermore, fighting (and unfortunately sometimes contributing to) the factionalism that the government campaign to root out communism had fostered in the Left, these Chicago and suburban women acted with courage and creativity, moving from early motherhood-
based campaigns to ban nuclear testing to coalition building that actively resisted the Vietnam War, both in Chicago and on the national scene.

Schneidhorst has produced six richly researched chapters which tell the stories of Chicago women, some of them veterans of the Popular Front, who became actors for peace in the early 1960s, survived a House Un-American Activities Committee investigation, challenged the lack of racial justice locally, and worked the system even as they confronted the loss of civil liberties during the 1968 Democratic Convention. After 1968, these women broadened their peace work by uniting the larger issues of militarism, racial and economic inequality, and continued police surveillance by the Chicago Red Squad and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The book could have used a good editor who would have insisted that the informative footnotes be indexed, asked for more frequent references to dates in the narrative to improve readability, hired a proofreader to catch omitted words, and provided a list of abbreviations. Yet Schneidhorst’s research is comprehensive. She used many primary sources, including twenty-four oral history interviews, some by Brad Lyttle, long-time Chicago peace worker. She also consulted the papers of several women’s peace and justice groups—among them Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Women’s Strike for Peace (WSP), Women for Peace (WFP), and Women Mobilized for Change (WMC)—to give an often-overlooked picture of how women worked to make change, despite the sexism of both the peace and racial justice movements and the institutions that they confronted.

To give only a few of many fine examples: after Martin Luther King Jr. brought his open-housing campaign to Chicago and the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO) was founded to continue the fight and excluded women, WMC, originating within the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), took matters into its own hands and resolved to bring “grassroots concerns to the attention of politicians” (p. 110.) They soon found themselves stymied by both the national government and a recalcitrant city system. When representatives of this racially and geographically diverse group met with Mayor Daley on the first anniversary of its founding, they lobbied forcefully for changes that would address racial and economic inequality. Daley became defensive and lost his customary cool in dealing with the women he had thought were harmless. Women from WMC came away from the meeting realizing that it was not possible to discuss “the deeper issues” with the mayor (p. 110).

In addition to “white-glove lobbying,” much of their organizing was educational and local, bringing ordinary citizens to oppose a war policy that progressives had known was wrong from the beginning. While not as mediagenic as the 1971 women’s only “Women against Daddy Warbucks” draft board raid in New York City, these adult Chicago women, from the beginning, appealed to hearts as well as minds. For instance, a 1962 anti-nuclear leaflet superimposed the scope of the original Hiroshima blast on a map of Chicago, and women dramatically paraded with empty baby carriages carrying the sign, “Empty through Stillbirth.”

At first, most of the Chicago women’s antiwar activity came from Jewish residents of the Hyde Park area in the southern part of the city, home of the University of Chicago and thus of the atomic bomb. But groups soon grew in the northern suburbs and other areas of the city. These localities sometimes worked together, sometimes independently, depending, it seems, on how individuals responded to continuing governmental harassment.

Throughout the history that Schneidhorst records, there were sizable internal struggles as many were concerned by the public perception that all peace activists were communists. So the early 1960s saw conflicts between radical purists,
such as Harriet Leffly, who traveled to the Soviet-convened World Peace Congress in 1962, and women such as Shirley Lens who worked to educate and mobilize a broad public. The women were maternalist, educating the public on the health issues in milk contaminated by nuclear fallout and using dramatic Hiroshima visuals to cry for the future of their children.

Leaders of WSP and WFP in Chicago used friendship networks to challenge federal and international leadership, urging them to end above-ground nuclear testing. In 1963-64, with the ratification of the atmospheric test ban treaty, the women moved to a more inclusive peace politics and called for economic conversion, merging the issues of peace and social justice and making for a more racially diverse group of activists than the peace movement as a whole. This diversity was strengthened by the activist and education work of the YWCA and its one imperative: to end racism.

The women’s groups whose stories Schneidhorst tells fell back on the time-honored principles of community relationships in reaction to the police brutality of 1968. Although they often supported both materially and emotionally those engaged in civil disobedience, they remained “committed to the idea that radical democracy was the instrument of fundamental social change” (p. 145). Their actions were traditional: lobbying; letter writing; vigils; protests; education; advocacy; and most important, coalition building with neighborhood groups to challenge a corrupt political system.

In the early 1970s, they returned to Popular Front rhetoric by unmasking the imperialist tenure of Richard Nixon and showing how his war policies were decimating even the middle class. For their stand, they were infiltrated by the FBI and Daley’s Red Squad. During the height of this surveillance activity, more than one thousand men—and women—were engaged in federal, state, and locally financed undercover operations in the Chicago area alone. Two of these women spies successfully infiltrated the Chicago Peace Council.

As this review goes to press, three men are on trial for allegedly contemplating a terrorist act during the 2010 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) conference held in Chicago. On that weekend, thousands of activists came to town and marched nonviolently to protest NATO imperialism and its obedience to U.S. security mandates. They also attended educational events organized by gender-neutral groups, such as Chicago Occupy and American Friends Service Committee (AFSC); these conferences were designed to provide tools for social change. Rahm Emmanuel's mayoral machine spent millions of dollars “protecting” citizens against violence that never happened, so they are using the young men's trial to prove that some violence might have been contemplated and that therefore their security money was spent wisely. Police infiltrators encouraged and entrapped these young, naïve, and disorganized visitors, just as they did earlier Chicago peace groups. Yes, it is still going on. Readers would do well to listen and learn from the persistence of the women activists who have gone before them, courageously paving the way to build a just and secure world.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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