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The Young Lords

Johanna Fernández's *The Young Lords: A Radical History* could hardly have been published at a more auspicious time. The fateful year 2020 saw not only the outbreak of a global pandemic but also, in the United States, a rejuvenation of Black Lives Matter and renewed national attention to issues of racial and economic justice. The pandemic and its economic consequences have further skewed a lopsided distribution of income, with US billionaires gaining over a trillion dollars in the last nine months of 2020 even as millions of people were thrown out of work and wages continued to stagnate. Popular resistance, in part inspired by Bernie Sanders's two presidential campaigns, seems to be gaining momentum, as the nation continues its headlong rush into an era of tumult likely reminiscent of both the 1930s and the 1960s-70s. The memory of the Young Lords resonates in our time of troubles.

Others have written about the Young Lords, including members Iris Morales (*Through the Eyes of Rebel Women: The Young Lords 1969–1976* [2016]) and Miguel Meléndez (*We Took the Streets: Fighting for Latino Rights with the Young Lords* [2003]), but Fernández's work, which focuses on the New York organization, is an exhaustive study grounded in archival research and extensive in-

terviews with surviving Lords. It covers every aspect of the group's history, not least the social and political context that was able to radicalize so many young people of color from Chicago (where the group began) to New York (where it was strongest) to smaller cities around the country. Not only scholars and students but also activists would benefit from reading this book, for, aside from the fascinating history itself, one can glean lessons on how to organize from the failures and successes of the Young Lords. Indeed, Fernández concludes the book by drawing a helpful list of such lessons.

The Young Lords is, in short, the definitive history of "one of the most creative and productive expressions of the New Left," a group that, for its brief existence of several years, was a highly effective heir to the Black Power movement (p. 7). It may have failed in its goal of sparking revolution among poor communities of color in the US and in Puerto Rico, but its ambitious and militant campaigns won significant reforms that helped push New York's postwar liberalism to its outer limits before colliding with the conservative backlash of the late 1970s and subsequent decades.

The group's humble beginnings hardly foretold such future success. The Young Lords started out as a small Puerto Rican gang in Chicago in the

early 1960s, no more “political” than any other local gang. But by early 1969 it was transforming, under the leadership of José “Cha Cha” Jiménez, into an activist organization addressing urban renewal, police brutality, and welfare rights. Very quickly they made connections with the Chicago Black Panthers, which led them to adopt the Panthers’ model of organization and its Ten-Point Program, in addition to such practices as building a free health clinic, starting breakfast and dental programs, publishing a newspaper, and even occupying a church briefly in the summer of 1969. As Fernández says, this bold move to emulate the Panthers “was precisely the example that Puerto Ricans in New York needed to propel them into motion” (p. 48).

The New York group had very different origins than the Chicago group. Its founders were not gang members but young activists and college students, particularly from SUNY Old Westbury. Mickey Melendez, a student there, had in January 1969 formed the Sociedad Albizu Campos (SAC, named after the iconic leader of Puerto Rico’s struggle for nationhood), a small organization devoted to bringing young Puerto Rican activists together. Members of the SAC traveled to Chicago in the summer of 1969 to meet Cha Cha Jiménez after reading an interview with him in the Black Panthers’ newspaper. Inspired by what Jiménez had created in Chicago, they returned to New York and set up a Young Lords affiliate in East Harlem, complete with the same Panthers-influenced structure and even similar regalia of purple berets, black military fatigues, and combat boots. The core members of the group, including Felipe Luciano (chairman), Pablo Guzmán, Juan González, Denise Oliver, David Perez, and several others, had already been radicalized by the racism and segregation they encountered in the New York school system, and in some cases had gained valuable training by subsequent work with the Community Action Programs funded by Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. Fernández’s discussion of these individual backgrounds serves to situate the Young

Lords in the context of New York’s explosive protests and riots of the late 1960s.

Once the Young Lords Organization (YLO)—later called the Young Lords Party—was formed in New York, it immediately launched its first campaign: the so-called Garbage Offensive, an attempt to draw public attention to the chronic crisis of poor sanitation and “epic garbage accumulation” in East Harlem (which was by far the most densely populated neighborhood in Manhattan) (p. 98). Conversations with local residents had revealed that they saw this problem, rather than police brutality or the independence of Puerto Rico or some other, more “sensational” issue, as the most urgent matter to be dealt with. So, in August 1969, the Young Lords organized a series of direct-action protests: they and other residents piled huge heaps of garbage (in some cases setting them on fire) at busy intersections to block traffic, even overturning cars and casting old refrigerators and other large items into the heaps. Very soon they captured the attention of the city’s elite press and political power-players, who realized they could no longer ignore the festering sore of inadequate sanitation in the city. At length, extensive reforms were introduced that did much to alleviate the crisis and make conditions in the city’s poorer and darker neighborhoods more livable than before.

Fernández’s account of the Garbage Offensive sets the pattern for her discussion of all the other campaigns the YLO embarked on in the following years. Rather than simply giving a factual narrative of what happened, she weaves into her analysis a discussion of the Young Lords’ ideological self-understandings, as formed against the backdrop of the tumultuous global politics of that era. For instance, in accord with the group’s Maoism (and Leninism), the very name “Garbage Offensive” recalled the Tet Offensive of 1968. The young activists saw themselves as applying to the urban context the tactics of guerrilla warfare, such as “flexibility, mobility, surprise and escape” (e.g., by discarding their uniforms and blending into the

crowd as soon as police showed up) (p. 106). They were at war, fighting for the national liberation of an internally and externally colonized people—in fact, for the liberation of Blacks, Asians, and Native Americans as well. But their war would not be fought through armed struggle; it was fought through community organizing, issue-based campaigns in the neighborhood, and an effort to build a cadre organization that soon attracted hundreds of young people as volunteers, members, and staff (for the Young Lords rented out an office where they printed a newspaper and other material, manned the phones, planned press conferences, etc.).

A whirlwind of activity ensued for years after the Garbage Offensive. The Young Lords were quick to join the welfare rights movement, for instance offering security at civil disobedience actions. Together with the Black Panthers, they collected clothing and distributed it to poor welfare mothers, in addition to establishing a free daily children's breakfast program. Regular political education classes, where classic revolutionary texts (by Mao, Lenin, Ho Chi Minh, Frantz Fanon, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and others) were read and discussed, "raised the consciousness" of members and residents. In the fall of 1969 the YLO got heavily involved in campaigns to reform the community's health infrastructure, from protesting impending cuts to staff and health services at Metropolitan Hospital to writing and publicizing (with the assistance of doctors) a Ten-Point Health Program that envisioned such radical changes as a publicly funded healthcare system, direct democratic governance of Metropolitan by staff and residents, and "the creation of small, neighborhood-based clinics" that would facilitate "a comprehensive, 'door-to-door' project of medical care and social services that prioritized care for drug users, prenatal care, childcare, and care for the elderly" (p. 142). These proposals were inspired by the Cuban Revolution's mass expansion and democratization of healthcare delivery.

Out of this campaign emerged the Young Lords' "most enduring legacy," the militancy they brought to "a preexisting campaign against childhood lead poisoning that pressured city hall to take action on a silent public health crisis" (p. 135). Fernández notes that in the 1960s, 43,000 old housing tenements that had been deemed "unfit for human habitation in 1901" continued to house Black, Puerto Rican, and Chinese tenants, whose children were consequently at grave risk of lead contamination. Various groups had brought attention to the issue, but it was the Young Lords' Lead Offensive in late 1969 that finally catalyzed change. They were able to secure two hundred lead-testing kits, after which they conducted door-to-door screenings that revealed high rates of contamination. With the help of media publicity, the city government was thus shamed into action. Almost immediately, the Department of Health created the Bureau of Lead Poisoning Control, as well as launching the Emergency Repair Program to remove lead paint from tenement walls. In a campaign reminiscent of the Young Lords' community-based healthcare plan, the city even sent teams of doctors into neighborhoods to test for illnesses and give sickle cell, rubella, and measles immunizations.

Within a few months, in short, the Young Lords had made a name for themselves in New York City. They were about to gain much more notoriety, however. While searching for a new location for their children's breakfast program in the fall of 1969, they came across the First Spanish United Methodist Church. Since its facilities were unused every day of the week except Sunday, it seemed like an ideal candidate to host the program. Unfortunately, the Cuban pastor and the church board adamantly disagreed, and for weeks continued to reject the Young Lords' arguments that they only wanted to help the church fulfill its Christian calling of serving the poor. At last, after an attempt one Sunday to publicly appeal to the congregation resulted in a "police riot" *within the church*—"nightsticks flying all over the place," as

one witness recalled, “blood all over the church”—the young activists decided they had no other recourse but to stage an occupation (p. 166). So on a Sunday late in December they occupied the building, nailing shut all the doors but one and announcing they would leave only after they were granted space for a “liberation school,” a daycare center, and the free breakfast program that had originally provoked the conflict.

Fernández’s discussion, as usual, brilliantly contextualizes the YLO’s Church Offensive, setting it against the backdrop of liberation theology, the teachings of the philosopher of education Paulo Freire, debates between liberal and leftist Americans over the causes of poverty, and the generational conflict between young Puerto Ricans (who tended to support the Lords’ militancy) and their elders (who were more wary, though frequently sympathetic). At press conferences, leaders of the occupation calmly and persuasively explained their goals, in fact so compellingly that clergymen, elected officials, and pop stars were driven to express their support. For ten days inside the church, the activists worked with professionals and community residents to feed children, provide free medical services, and run a liberation school that featured lessons on US imperialism and Black resistance. In the evenings, things loosened up: the strict discipline of the daytime “surrendered to creative revelry” that was audible from a block away, in which participants would perform Puerto Rican folk music, spoken word poetry, and dance. The People’s Church thereby “destabilized traditional conceptions of cultural production and one of its major assumptions: that people of color produce lower forms of art” (p. 183). This was the first public staging of the “Nuyorican” identity that was later institutionalized in sites on the Lower East Side, the Bronx, and elsewhere in the city.

The People’s Church could hardly last forever; it was impressive, indeed, that it lasted as long as it did, almost two weeks. The Young Lords’ attorneys could at best postpone the inevitable arrests.

Eventually the church dropped charges and agreed to activists’ demands for a daycare center and a drug rehabilitation clinic—though it never followed through on its promises. At least Governor Nelson Rockefeller, directly influenced by the Young Lords and the Black Panthers, started a breakfast program for 35,000 poor children in the city.

By 1970 the Young Lords were expanding significantly, opening branches in the South Bronx, the Lower East Side, Philadelphia, Boston, and other cities. With this expansion it became necessary to deal with issues around race and, especially, gender. Fernández’s nuanced account shows that the latter was much more problematic than the former. While racial prejudice and conflict was hardly unknown within the Young Lords—for many Puerto Ricans had absorbed dominant racist fears of Black men—the group was effective in promoting an inclusive and solidaristic understanding of race, as shown by the fact that 25 percent of its membership consisted of Black Americans. Non-Puerto Rican Latinos were also welcome, though they constituted a small minority of about 7 percent.

Relations between men and women were more fraught. The YLO was almost entirely led by men, even though by early 1970 approximately 40 percent of its members were female. It was not as if the men were oblivious to feminism: in the group’s founding political document, Point 10 read, “We Want Equality for Women. Machismo Must be Revolutionary ... Not Oppressive.” The problem, as Fernández notes, is that machismo by its nature entails male dominance. Sexism, both subtle and overt, was rife within the organization, as women frequently adopted female-typical (“background”) roles and were inappropriately propositioned or disrespected by men. A women’s caucus, inspired by white feminists’ consciousness-raising circles, was formed in the spring of 1970 to embolden and empower female members, and it had some success. As one young participant

said later, “Getting clarity helped me fight my own tendency to sit in the background and bite my tongue and be ashamed to speak because what do I know, you know, I’m just a woman” (p. 255). The Young Lords looked askance at the mainstream of the women’s movement, which they viewed as too middle-class and inattentive to the oppression of Third World women, but it heavily influenced them nonetheless.

A men’s caucus was formed later in 1970 to continue the process of “reeducating” members, specifically to teach men—in the words of one of the Young Lords’ pamphlets—“to cook, to care for children, to be open to cry and show emotions because these are all good things—needed to build a new society” (p. 263). Point 10 of the Thirteen-Point Program was rewritten to state, “Down with Machismo and Male Chauvinism.” Around the same time, in May 1970, Denise Oliver was the first woman elected to the Central Committee. Soon thereafter, the organization adopted the policy that sexist behavior would be formally denounced and those engaging in it would be charged, tried, and disciplined. The YLO even published a lucid and sophisticated Position Paper on Women that demonstrated its commitment to the goal of raising women’s status and challenging sexism, including the distinct forms of sexism in Puerto Rican culture. The Young Lords, therefore, were unusual in the growing Puerto Rican movement for their sincere attempts to address both anti-Black racism and oppression of women. As leader Iris Morales said years later, “Thinking on it now, the Lords made a real contribution. We kept saying if we’re gonna change society, we have to change ourselves. I challenge you to study any of the movement pictures of that time in terms of the other organizations and especially the organizations in Puerto Rico, and you will see a total absence of women and Afro-Puerto Ricans in leadership” (p. 265).

The history of the Young Lords was, if anything, even more dense and eventful during and

after 1970 than in the organization’s first year. In addition to members’ usual daily activities of selling the newspaper, leafleting, attending speaking engagements, assisting residents with advocacy at schools or welfare offices, testing door-to-door for tuberculosis, and so forth, they launched several major campaigns and suffered several tragedies that would contribute to the group’s eventual downfall. In the summer of 1970, they began a months-long grassroots organizing effort at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx to expose the deplorable conditions there, the climactic moment of this campaign being a highly public and effective day-long occupation of the hospital. One of the upshots of this long effort was a Patient Bill of Rights—including such demands as the right to refuse treatment, to know what medicine is being prescribed and what its side effects are, to choose your doctor, to have free daycare centers in hospitals, and to receive free healthcare—that has, in many respects, been replicated by hospitals across the country under the same name. Fernández’s chapter on this ambitious campaign is one of the richest and most riveting of the book.

Around the same time, there occurred a couple of events that ultimately weakened the Young Lords Party. First, beloved chairman Felipe Luciano was demoted to low-level cadre for having been on “unauthorized leave” for one day. When, as a result, he quit the YLP entirely, the organization lost the person best positioned to lead it through the crises it was about to face. One such crisis happened very soon afterward: the Lords again occupied the First Spanish United Methodist Church—this time, however, *armed*, a highly provocative move Luciano would have vehemently opposed. The decision to brandish arms was, at least, understandable: member Julio Roldán had just committed suicide (or, according to his comrades, been murdered) in the Manhattan House of Detention because of his barbarous treatment. As Fernández relates, in these years young people of color across the city and the country were rising up, often explosively and violently, against epi-

demic brutality inside and outside prison walls. “We are armed,” stated a YLP flyer, “because we must defend ourselves, and we advise all Puerto Ricans in New York to begin preparing for their defense. The U.S. government is killing us, and now we must defend ourselves or die as a nation” (p. 324).

The problem with the armed church occupation was that it increased government surveillance and repression, frequently conducted under the auspices of the FBI’s COINTELPRO. The occupiers were able to escape immediate legal consequences by surreptitiously sneaking their weapons out of the church before police had a chance to confiscate them. But in the meantime, they had intensified the state’s hostility.

A more damaging move, however, was the YLP’s decision in early 1971 to shift many of its resources to organizing in Puerto Rico for national independence. In the end, this campaign not only proved largely fruitless—organizers often did not even speak Spanish, and they faced fierce repression and logistical challenges—but it also contributed to a climate of demoralization, internal party squabbling, and the loss of several crucial members who disagreed with the focus on Puerto Rico. Mass membership began to decline, the YLP offices in East Harlem and the Lower East Side closed (even as the party newspaper continued publication), and the Central Committee grew more authoritarian and intolerant of dissent. COINTELPRO’s infiltration and disruption heightened trends of paranoia and factionalism, tendencies that in fact were common to groups on the left at this time. Fernández also faults the Young Lords’ ever-strengthening Maoism, including its belief—which motivated, for example, the Puerto Rican misadventure—that “sheer will, dedication, and hard work among small groups rather than classes form the motor force of change,” in addition to the Lords’ hypercentralization and disconnection from the grassroots beginning in 1971 (p. 375). The YLP straggled on into 1974 (under a

new name: the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers’ Organization), but it had drastically shrunk in size and influence.

Such, then, was the ignominious demise of what had once been “a profoundly effective, beloved, and exciting socialist organization that fueled the power of the New Left and made a lasting impression on U.S. consciousness and history” (p. 377). *The Young Lords* does ample justice to this history, not least in its extremely sympathetic and even-handed treatment of the vicissitudes and failures the organization experienced. One might have wished the author had said more about the Young Lords’ history in cities outside New York, but this would have increased the book’s length to a truly mammoth size.

The book’s useful coda summarizes the Young Lords’ achievements and contributions, from helping bring about the construction of a new building at Lincoln Hospital to “anchor[ing] a renaissance in Puerto Rican art and reclaim[ing] the Afro-Taino roots of their culture” (p. 383). As mentioned earlier, Fernández also summarizes some lessons for organizers: for example, “Bold direct action that stops the normal functioning of municipal life captures the attention of media and the public, shifts the terms of political debate, and broadens the public’s understanding of social problems” (p. 384). The Lords were expert at direct action, and at communicating with the public. Activists today would do well to study their strategies, tactics, and messaging.

The United States is now entering an era of turbulence that in many respects parallels the 1960s. Struggles around class inequality, racism, police brutality, prison reform, urban housing, the healthcare industry, and US imperialism promise to become as prominent in the years ahead as they were fifty years ago. *The Young Lords* will help to ensure that memory of that earlier time continues to inform the seemingly endless fight for human dignity.

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