

Interview with Torie Osborn

Victor Cohen

As a college student, **Torie Osborn** attended the founding national convention of the New American Movement (NAM) and was one of the first beneficiaries of NAM's "fifty-percent rule," which mandated the leadership responsibilities be split equally among men and women. After serving as a member of NAM's National Interim Committee, she came out as a lesbian and moved to Chicago. There she joined NAM's women-only chapter, *Blazing Star*, and worked for *In These Times*, the left-wing magazine founded by Jimmy Weinstein, one of NAM's visionaries. Meeting singer and political activist Holly Near at NAM's 1976 convention cemented Torie's interest in the women's music movement, and shortly afterwards she moved to Ukiah, California to work for Near's record label, Redwood Records. Torie went on to co-found and run the West Coast Women's Music Festival and produced (among others) *Sweet Honey and the Rock*, Chilean folk music group Inti-Illimani (the whose song "Venceremos" was the anthem of the Allende government), and Holly Near.

Torie came to Los Angeles for a visit in 1979 and has been actively involved in local and national politics since then. After organizing around lesbian feminism and Latin American solidarity issues, in 1988 Torie became the executive director of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center, and in 1992, the executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington, D.C. Torie returned to L.A. in 1997 to serve as executive director of the Liberty Hill Foundation, one of the nation's most admired social-change foundations and, in 2005, served for two years in the cabinet of Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa, in which she inaugurated a new position as public liaison to the philanthropic community and designed, among others, the Mayor's policy plan on homelessness. Today, Torie is Chief Civic Engagement Officer for the United Way of Greater Los Angeles. She has been a contributor to the *Nation*, *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* and has made appearances on *The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour*, *Good Morning America*, *National Public Radio* and CNN's *Crossfire*. Her award-winning book, *Coming Home to America* (St. Martin's 1996), is about the LGBT communities' contributions to the ongoing national debate on values and visions for America's future.

This interview was conducted by Victor Cohen in Torie Osborn's house in Santa Monica on December 23, 2007.

Victor Cohen: What brought you to the Left? Were you already involved in activist politics when you came to college?

Torie Osborn: Yep. I'm fifty-seven. I'm too young to have been part of the civil rights movement, but it was what inspired me to get

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involved in the antiwar movement in high school, from '65 on. I graduated in '68, the Columbia uprising had just happened, and it was the center of the student movement. So I applied and went to Barnard in the fall. This was before women went to Columbia. Well, of course, by the time I got to Barnard, SDS had fallen apart. It had become Weathermen and Progressive Labor, and there really wasn't an organizational place for somebody like me who was an independent radical. When I was a freshman, I remember somebody used the words the "New Left," so I said, "Okay, that must be me."

Cohen: Were your parents on the Left? How did you come to this so quickly? Right out of high school you were ready to join the movement?

Osborn: My parents were good liberals, Cold War anticommunist liberals: voted-for-Kennedy-Roosevelt-Adlai-Stevenson-Democrats. They were Catholic; they liked the Berrigan brothers, and I saw my politics as the logical extension of their politics. They valued civil rights, social reform. It was pretty inevitable that I would be attracted to the New Left. But it created a schism in my family. All through high school I argued with them about the Vietnam War. It took until the Pentagon papers in 1971 for my parents to turn against the war and for me to be vindicated. But that happened in liberal households all over—the kids became radicals of various stripes. Today, there's practically no difference in our politics. [chuckles] I mean, I'm older and have a mortgage and George Bush has radicalized them.

But there was also a mass movement all around me, and it was inviting and intoxicating. At Columbia, they did a survey and, if I'm remembering correctly, something like fifteen percent of the students considered themselves conservatives, but eighty-five percent of us were some form of radical. We rebelled against the word "liberal." Of course, Columbia was the heart of the student movement, and the peer culture tended to be leftist, whether counter-cultural or overtly political, and everything in between. I was never a super-counter-cultural person, but we all lived in households, in communes, in collectives. Everybody did. The counter-culture was a mass phenomenon. And then there was the music and the folk clubs. I waitressed at a folk club in high school.

When I came to college, I hadn't read any theory; I didn't know anything about anything, but I identified as a radical. I remember all these guys—and they were all white men—would stand up in front of Low Library at demonstrations yelling about the "racist, imperialist, genocidal" war. And I'm thinking, "Hello, I want to be organized. Could you please explain what these big words mean?" It was really obnoxious. I attended one of the first women's liberation meetings at Barnard in 1969 and eventually found a group called Students for a Restructured University that I could connect with, a left liberal group. There was just a lot of activism. This was in '70, after we shut down the university following the invasion of Cambodia.

Then I transferred—for a bunch of personal reasons—to a small school in Vermont called Middlebury College, which was very un-

political but turned out to be very good for me. Instead of feeling lost at Columbia, I was one of only two organizers on campus, the other being Steve Early (a longtime labor organizer and writer), and he became my mentor. Middlebury was a great place to learn how to organize because there were only us two. I could be a big fish in a small pond. We got nearly forty people to May Day in 1971 in D.C., where over 11,000 students did civil disobedience. Steve and I organized the Radical Education Action Project and brought in all these speakers. I was an editor and had a column called “Notes from Women’s Lib” in the campus newspaper. We lived in communes and collectives during the summer, doing antiwar organizing, supporting efforts such as Medical Aid to Indochina—you know. [SDS organizer] Lee Webb came and taught us about Marxism; we climbed a mountain, sat down under a tree, and learned the “labor theory of value” and other basic Marxist tenets. I met Peg Strobel in my senior year, ’71-’72, and she and I founded the Middlebury College Women’s Union, the first feminist group there, and became friends. She was also my African history teacher and one reader on my thesis.

Cohen: That’s when you heard about the New American Movement?

Osborn: Yes. In my senior year, in ’72; I can’t remember how or why Steve and I went to the founding national convention in Minneapolis. I was impressed with Michael Lerner’s pamphlet, “Learning from the Mistakes of the Past,” and I ended up getting elected to the National Interim Committee because of NAM’s rule about having 50 percent women. I did not have the leadership skills. I was really like a baby—an apprentice organizer. But that experience made me a believer in affirmative action. So I was elected to this thirteen-member committee with Jim Weinstein, Peggy Somers, Harry Boyte, Roberta Lynch, Frank Ackerman, Judy MacLean . . . I can’t remember them all. But Frank and I would drive to these meetings every six weeks, in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, or Chicago. They rotated. I would drive from Vermont and pick him up in Boston, and the two of us would drive to the Midwest. The really weird thing was that out of thirteen of us, three of us (Frank, Peggy and myself) had been to the same Quaker elementary school outside of Philadelphia, Haverford Friends School. I mean, it shows you the class and cultural limitation of our corner of the New Left. But it also shows you the power of the Quakers to influence people’s worldviews.

Cohen: What about NAM drew you in so strongly?

Osborn: Whether it was because I was born in Denmark, or because I was a recovering Catholic, I had a strong antipathy for ideology, for any kind of fundamentalism. I always felt, if you think yours is the only one right and true way, I’m out of there. And NAM was very open. There were different stripes of people, from kind of social democrats to former communists. It was a much more comfortable place to be if you were uncomfortable with ideological fun-

damentalism like I was, probably for more personal and cultural reasons than anything else.

Cohen: Was there any tension between NAM's left politics and the sexual politics of the gay movement?

Osborn: No, not at all. I mean, that was why people like me, who came out as open lesbians during that period, could be in NAM. It was completely open, pro-gay liberation, pro-feminist. NAM was the only socialist gay place in the left that completely embraced gay and lesbian liberation. I mean, in general, there was not only deep homophobia and sexism on the left, but institutional homophobia in most of the left groups. There were lots of open gays and lesbians in NAM. The first NAM staffer, Brian Coyle, in Minneapolis was openly gay, and died later of AIDS.

Cohen: When you joined NAM, did you think you were going to see socialism? I mean, in your lifetime?

Osborn: Yeah, we certainly did. If you had asked me in 1971 until probably '76, there was no question about it. Of course, we had strong critiques of the socialist countries. We tended to approve of the Soviet Union's foreign policy, disapprove of China's foreign policy, but had a lot of interest in China in general. And I absolutely believed that communism would prove to be too rigid. We had a lot of hope, the New Left, that a new form of socialism would come—decentralized and democratic. Our politics were revolutionary—we were to the left of social democracy. And we had many, many debates and arguments. Would it be social democracy? Would it be a kinder, gentler Canada? I mean, who knew? But we definitely thought that it would be socialism, social democracy at least.

I don't think I ever expected this total hegemony of capitalism and the horrible inequality and destruction of the planet. I mean, many of us were environmentalists, but it wasn't our primary movement. Our primary movement would have been the war, imperialism, then Central America, feminism, gay liberation; we never, ever would have predicted today, then.

I mean, we had the arrogance to think we would create a new socialist-feminist, democratic politics. When I look back on it, one of the biggest mistakes we made was rejecting, along with our parents who had brought us the Vietnam War, their liberal democratic politics and the electoral political process. We didn't see the link between reformism and radicalism. Our narrowness ran against the advice of some of the wiser people in the organization—Dorothy Healey, Jim Weinstein, the elders of the movement—who were strongly suggesting that the Left ought to take over the Democratic Party, do exactly what the right did with the Republican Party a little later. But we were so disillusioned with electoral politics—the Democratic Party was the party of our fathers, if you will, and it had brought us the war, so we rejected it wholesale. We believed totally in social movements outside electoral politics, in this kind of spontaneous uprising—almost a cultural theory of change. There were a

few people who would make exceptions for local politics, city councils, maybe make a run at a state level. When I was in Vermont, Bernie Sanders had the Liberty Union Party, a third party. He eventually moved into the Democratic Party, but he was always an independent.

Cohen: While you were on the National Interim Committee, you stayed in Vermont?

Osborn: Yes, this entire time, I was still in Vermont, living in communes, doing antiwar and feminist stuff, but then in 1976, Jimmy Weinstein hired me to be on the founding staff of *In These Times*, and I moved to Chicago. He hired a whole bunch of NAM people—Judy MacLean came and was a reporter, David Moberg as well, though he wasn't in NAM but was like most of the people he hired, all in and around the Chicago chapter of NAM. By then NAM had moved from Minneapolis to Chicago. People moved from all over to *In These Times*.

Jimmy was one of the people who linked us to the Old Left. In fact, he wanted *In These Times* to be *The Appeal to Reason* of the New Left. This was in 1976—the war's over, the New Left is dying, but his vision was for everybody to hawk copies of *In These Times* on street corners, like the Socialists had *The Appeal To Reason*. I was the circulation manager and knew that by the 1970s one did direct mail to build circulation, not street hawking. Anyway, I only lasted a year because they were extremely sexist.

By this time, the gay movement was really flourishing and I was starting to do gay and lesbian organizing. I worked in a lesbian work group called Blazing Star, connected to the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, which was a socialist-feminist grassroots group. For the feminist Left, the CWLU was a tremendous pipeline of organizing and training. Heather Booth and Vivian Rothstein, for example, were—and remain—legendary organizers linking economic justice and feminism.

Cohen: What were some of the issues you worked on?

Osborn: Well, there was an anti-gay, homophobic campaign that Anita Bryant did in 1977, "Save Our Children." It was a national right-wing campaign against homosexuals, and it mobilized the gay movement, which was beginning to make local reforms; this was a backlash campaign that presaged the organized backlash that came later. But it also motivated us to organize against her. When she came to Chicago, we organized a demonstration. I was editing Blazing Star's newspaper, and my partner took a picture of one of our Blazing Star people putting a pie in Anita Bryant's face. I got to write my favorite headline ever: "Anita Bryant gets her just desserts!"

But by the time I was in Chicago, some left sectarian group had colonized Chicago's Liberation Union and was destroying it. So by '76-'77, CWLU died, but Blazing Star, the lesbian work group continued.

Cohen: They joined NAM, right?

Osborn: Yes. I was kind of disaffected by then—I mean, the sexism was so horrible at *In These Times* that I left the Left. I said “good-bye to all that” five years after an earlier generation of feminists had, and just threw myself into lesbian feminism. Not with a big statement, but, you know, the New Left was dying and the vibrancy to me, as a lesbian, was really in lesbian music. So I got involved with producing women’s music concerts and soon moved out to California to run Holly Near’s record company.

Cohen: You ended up here in Los Angeles, though?

Osborn: Well, in ’79 I moved down to Los Angeles for a relationship for a short period of time and met Dorothy Healey and Donna and Frank Wilkinson. The [NAM] Socialist School was still going on. My partner at the time was a very funny woman comic named Robin Tyler, and she taught a couple of courses there. It was in the basement of that church on Wilshire. I think it had seen better days, but it was still around. And L.A. NAM was an interesting mix of Old Left and New Left. That wasn’t true on the East Coast—there it was all New Left, all my generation. But in Los Angeles, [it was different] because of Dorothy and all of the people that she brought into NAM. She became a mentor to many, many, many of us. I mean, she was critical to anybody who was in Los Angeles—and even in NAM in general. She would come to the conventions, and she was an extraordinary teacher—and bearer—of lessons from the Old Left and was a translator of theory into real life, practical stuff. I quote her all the time, still. I thanked her in my book I wrote about the gay movement, *Coming Home to America*. Dorothy was a living history lesson in social movements and how they happened, and the ups and downs of them. She was what made NAM in Los Angeles really special.

I was only here for a few months in ’79. My life was still women’s music. That continued for a couple more years, and then I moved down to Los Angeles again to go to business school in ’82, at UCLA. My primary work was in the gay and lesbian movement, but business school was my concession to the yuppie eighties. And I stayed in touch with Dorothy. Did a lot of education around Chile and Central America, Central America solidarity stuff, and then worked on the Great Peace March, David Mixner’s failed antinuclear march with Barbara Zheutlin and some other former NAM people.

Cohen: Were you involved in the discussions around the merger between NAM and DSOC?

Osborn: I didn’t participate in those debates. By then, the discussion just seemed so abstract, and there was nobody organizing any base. The best socialist organizers had gone into the labor movement, the white-collar-public-employees parts of the labor movement, or Nine to Five.

Cohen: When you say the New Left had “collapsed” a few years earlier, what do you mean?

Osborn: Suddenly there wasn’t the buzz, the constant conversation. I mean, when you have a mass movement, every table, every collective space is talking about the movement, debating about what to do, organizing people. There’s a vibrancy that spills into every institution and every life, and change is afoot everywhere. Then suddenly people were just retreating into private lives. There was a lot of disaffection. People were going back to graduate school, building careers. People were doing their own thing instead of asking the question, “How can I be most useful to the movement?”

And you called it “the movement.” That might even be one of the first signs [of its end], when people stopped talking about “the movement.” Well, which movement? People were active in the labor movement, the women’s movement, or the gay movement, or education reform—reforming this or that. But they didn’t identify as being part of any common broader movement. In the sixties—starting in ’66—you could be in “the movement” and just be in the antiwar movement, but it was still part of one big movement. That suddenly changed after the war ended.

Of course, in 1980 it really changed, because the material base—the economic base was pulled out from under us when Reagan was elected and the right took formal power. In the Carter years—even under Nixon—they had CETA [the Comprehensive Employee and Training Act], a federal jobs program for community-based organizations that funded the infrastructure of the Left, like the Gay and Lesbian Center here in L.A. that I ran in the late eighties and early nineties. Fifty percent of its jobs—thirty of the sixty people on staff—were funded by this program. Through CETA, people could actually make a modest living working in community centers and clinics and food co-ops. When Reagan came in, he dumped this program in his first thirty days in office. Thirty people in the Gay and Lesbian Center immediately lost their jobs. It’s like what the right wing has done with the Faith Based Initiative where they turned the spigot of government to build the infrastructure of their antiabortion movement. We did that in the seventies and created a whole infrastructure of the Left.

Of course, it was so cheap to live—I think I made six hundred dollars a month when I worked at *In These Times*. And I had no trouble living.

Cohen: In Chicago.

Osborn: Yeah, in Chicago. I didn’t save money, we didn’t have pensions, we didn’t think about the future, but I could live just fine. Gas was cheaper, rent was cheaper. The cost of living was cheaper. And we lived in these households, so it was inexpensive. And we didn’t have debt. We didn’t have credit cards. It was a totally different life.

Today, my students at UCLA just shock the crap out of me. These are sophomores, juniors, and seniors, working twenty to twenty-five

hours a week on top of a full course load. They already have twenty, thirty thousand dollars of credit card debt, on top of all kinds of other kinds of debt. By the time they're graduating with their BAs, they have to make forty or fifty thousand dollars a year so they can start to pay that down. They're already shackled to the system. When we left college, we had no debt because college was cheap. It cost two thousand dollars a year for me to go to Barnard. That's tuition and everything.

Cohen: And that was a private school.

Osborn: And that was a Seven Sisters elite school. And the state schools were much cheaper, right? All of that fed the movement. When Reagan came in, it was really the end.

You know, for women, gay folks, people of color, the Chicano movement, and all of the various sorts of empowerment movements—disability rights—the seventies were every bit as vibrant as the sixties. My white male friends, their high point was the late sixties, early seventies. For the rest of us, the mass movement continued until Reagan in '80. Now identity politics has a bad name on the Left, but for many of us it was just a natural outgrowth. I understand how it can be a problem. I agree with Todd Gitlin's critique that while the right was taking over, we were taking over the English department. I get it, but [identity politics] were definitely a huge gateway into social activism for millions of people who had never been involved before.

But really, if I could recruit back from comparative literature and filmmaking all the young great minds there and get them into action research and sociology and history and political science . . . If they want to be academics, great, but how many darned filmmakers do we need? How many comparative literature people do we need? It's weird.

Cohen: What do you make of that?

Osborn: I think it's a legacy of a conservative era. I think it is totally about right-wing domination of American politics over the last thirty years and academics becoming increasingly isolated from any base, from any mass movement. In our day, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, were invaluable parts of the movement. And, you know, then it became these "theorists." Who can understand this stuff like queer theory? Whole classes on lesbian haircuts? Give me a break. I mean, my generation understands culture, and there were yuppies and people who made the culture an end in itself. But for most of us, it was part of the revolution; it was part of transforming society. It was the personalized political. We weren't just about freedom of individual expression. And I love the art today, the performance art, the slam poetry, many of the things that have come out of this younger generation. I mean, I understand that there are artists among us, and I'm not one of them. But the post-modern stuff—it's just unintelligible. And what good is that?

Cohen: When you became involved with the LGBT movement, did your history in the New Left and NAM help you?

Osborn: Absolutely. I brought all my New Left social justice commitment and knowledge from Dorothy about how to build movements, into the LGBT movement at a time that was very critical. In fact, a lot of us came out of the New Left or out of gay liberation—the Lavender Left had been the big group here in Los Angeles—into ACT UP. I went to the Gay and Lesbian Center at the height of the AIDS epidemic from '87 to '92, and I mean, it was war. I ran an organization that had sixty people when I got there, a hundred and sixty when I left, and we were losing a staff member a month to AIDS. I was going to the hospital every night and a funeral once a week. It was like being in another world from my straight left friends.

From there, I became Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, during what I called “the Year of the Queer,” in '93. I was on TV all the time, this unbelievably visible person. There was a profile of me on page A17 of the *New York Times*, the first-ever gay profile. I got offered a book deal but left my big visible job because I hated it. I was under contract to write the book, but it wasn't until a couple years later the book came out.

Cohen: What's it about?

Osborn: It's explaining the journey from coming out to collective action. Some of it is interesting. You know, you do your best. I learned how to write a book. It'll serve me well when I write more books. In '97, I came back to L.A. knowing that I wanted to be involved in economic and racial justice, to get back to my roots in broader progressive politics after this very successful stint helping to build the gay and lesbian movement. So I went to the Liberty Hill Foundation and ran it until 2005 when I went to work for the mayor [of Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa].

What's interesting is how many NAM people were involved in Liberty Hill. I kind of reconnected to my own [past]. Michelle Prichard, the Executive Director then, was a big NAM person. She's still at Liberty Hill. I met Peter Dreier and Bob Gottlieb, and Bob I had seen at many NAM conventions in another era. I reconnected with Frank and Donna Wilkinson, and Dorothy with her son, Richard, until she moved to D.C. to be with Richard.

Cohen: How do you evaluate your experiences in the context of today's political landscape? Do you think we'll see another social movement like the ones you grew up in?

Osborn: Totally. But we're in a right-wing era. We've had thirty years of right-wing domination of politics. I mean, it'll happen again, if you believe as Dorothy Healey taught me to believe—the Left will rise again. But most people would think it would be irrelevant to have a study group on Marxism, for example. You might have that in a university. But [outside that world], it would be so marginal that no-

body would join it. It's not that I don't think Marxism can teach us something, or [that] unregulated capitalism isn't dangerous, but I just think that—at least in my lifetime—we're talking about reforming capitalism, not overthrowing it. And we really did think we'd see a revolution. I mean, in NAM, when we talked about a revolution, we really talked about a new American movement, a new American revolution. The people will rise again, but the next great American social movement won't look or feel the same as the New Left, just as the New Left seemed unrecognizable to the Old Left.