

Interview with John Beverley

Victor Cohen

In 1972, at the start of his career as a professor of Spanish and Latin American literature at the University of Pittsburgh, **John Beverley** joined the New American Movement (NAM). In NAM, he found a fitting home to his political outlook, which was informed not only by his positive and negative experiences in the radical student Left of the 1960s, but also by his time in graduate school at the University of California, San Diego studying critical theory and the Frankfurt School under Frederic Jameson. As a member of the Pittsburgh NAM chapter, Beverly devoted himself to practical projects such as organizing a faculty union, though he also played a role in shaping NAM's outlook on international politics. It was in this latter context that Beverly worked on the committee to merge NAM and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) to form the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Beverly continues to teach Spanish and Latin American literature and cultural studies at the University of Pittsburgh and was a founding member of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group. His most recent books are *From Cuba* (Duke UP 2002), a collection of essays by Cuban artists and writers, and *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minnesota UP 2004). This interview took place in Beverly's home in Pittsburgh on June 20, 2007. It was conducted and transcribed by Victor Cohen.

Victor Cohen: So, before we started recording, you were talking briefly about your graduate school experience—you said you went to UC San Diego?

John Beverley: I did, in the late '60s.

Cohen: Is that where and when you got into Left politics?

Beverley: No, I was already into the Left when I was an undergraduate in the early '60s when I went to Princeton. There was a socialist club there, and I got involved with that. I don't know why, because my parents are both Republicans. I was interested in Beatnik poetry, literature was my thing. This socialist club was in turn connected to the American Socialist Party—the party of Norman Thomas and Eugene Debs—and they had a youth organization called the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL). YPSL was a very contradictory organization because it was absorbing a lot of people

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like myself who were being radicalized in the early '60s, but the official line of YPSL was a Cold War socialist line, that Communism is the main enemy, like the British Labour Party line—anti-Communist, but pro-Socialist, pro-labor.

That meant YPSL was very bad on two issues that for my generation were very important. One was the Cuban revolution, and the other was the Vietnam War. This was 1962, '63, '64. Some young people—we were still a minority then—were becoming politicized, and we were very skeptical about Vietnam. Our parents were saying, "Well, look, you know, we fought in World War II, and now it's your turn." And we said, "No [laughs]. Forget it." That's why I stayed in graduate school—one of the reasons. By staying in school, you could keep your draft deferment. It was clear to me—I don't know why, I wasn't particularly versed in political things—but I just thought that was going to be a bad war. But the Socialist Party was in favor of the war, and in that stance you see the roots of Neo-Conservative politics. A lot of people who were close to the American Socialist Party at that time ended up being proto-neoconservatives.

That was a tension in the early '60s on the Left, and, as you probably know, that led to a big showdown at Port Huron, where a youth organization allied to the Socialist Party declared itself anti-anti-Communist. For that, they were expelled by Michael Harrington and the leadership of the Socialist Party, and that's what leads to the formation of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). I wasn't myself around when that happened—I was in Europe at the time—but certainly I would have sympathized with the SDS position. So then I came back to the States and went to graduate school first in Madison, Wisconsin and then in California. I was in Spanish literature, and when I was in Princeton, some of my advisors had gone to San Diego.

Cohen: Was Herbert Marcuse there at the time?

Beverley: Marcuse was still there. And that was obviously a draw for me, too. I hadn't read Marcuse, but I'd heard a lot about him, and the idea of working in a place where he was was attractive. And being in California in the '60s—that was nice, too. So I ended up there—I wound up getting involved with the youth group of the Socialist Workers' Party. The Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), I think it was called.

Cohen: They weren't related to the American Socialist Party, correct?

Beverley: No, the SWP was a different party—it was Trotskyist and very different from the American Socialist Party. I liked them because they were very gung-ho about third-world revolutions—Cuba, black nationalism—and they were big on Malcolm X. But when I went out to California, I got more into an SDS-sort-of-mode. I thought the Trots were too . . . you know, they had this idea of the vanguard party, so every time they entered into a political movement, like the antiwar movement (which they had a big role in), their idea was to keep the

politics at the broadest possible level and then cull people out of that into their own organization, as opposed to trying to radicalize the issues. I thought that was a bad model.

I liked the SDS way of creating a very broad, generational, heterogeneous political formation. You and I were talking earlier about the Popular Front—that always seemed to make more sense to me than a revolutionary vanguard that has the correct line. The great thing about SDS was that it wasn't sectarian, so that's why it had several hundred thousand members. And even beyond those several hundred thousand people, for one reason or another, SDS had had a much wider influence on many thousands—millions, perhaps—of others. So I got closer to an SDS perspective in San Diego.

Cohen: What kinds of activities was SDS up to?

Beverley: Well, mainly it was a campus organization. There'd be demonstrations against the war, meetings where they would invite speakers from the Black Panthers, but mainly campus things. I remember a famous meeting with Eldridge Cleaver. He showed up—and immediately got into a big fight with a feminist. He was very antifeminist, and there were a lot of feminists in San Diego SDS. Another meeting featured a debate between Marcuse and Ernest Mandel, a famous Trotskyist economist—one of the big books of the '60s was Mandel's *Marxist Political Economy* (1962). Mandel thought the workers were still relevant and Marcuse felt the workers had been bought out by consumer capitalism, and the new social movement was going to be coming from the counterculture. That was a big debate.

More than an activism thing, San Diego was a kind of intellectual experience. Graduate school, sure, but it wasn't just graduate school. We had the idea that something was happening in theory that was also radical, that being radical didn't necessarily involve going away from the university into the community, which was a kind of SDS model: leave the universities, go into the communities, start community organizations.

Cohen: Can you unpack that connection between radical politics and theory? Today, it seems very difficult to get a concrete sense of what that means. Was that connection more obvious back then?

Beverley: I don't think it was obvious then, either, because the dominant impulse if you were getting radicalized in the late '60s was to leave the university and go into full-time political activism, which usually meant the community organizing or the labor movement. I remember that when I got to Pittsburgh, there was some socialist group that a lot of academics were associated with, and their theory was that everybody should go to work in industry.

Cohen: Go into the mills . . .

Beverley: Go into the mills. So all these people I knew went into the mills, which promptly closed down [laughs]. It was bad timing, to say the least.

Cohen: Would you characterize that as a kind of anti-intellectualism?

Beverley: Yeah, and I think that has its roots in the old Communist Party (CP). It was always suspicious of intellectuals as being petty bourgeois. But that was also a New Left model, an SDS model. I mean, the SDS kids were incubated in the university, but they quickly went out to do community organizing. They had all these experimental community organizing projects in Newark, or Detroit, and that was what you did. A lot of New American Movement (NAM) people come out of that experience being university kids, middle-class, going into these experimental community organizing projects, civil rights projects, going into the South, and then making a life out of that. My situation was a little different and represents a minority tendency within NAM, which was the idea of staying within the university and trying to develop a radical presence, not just saying “we’re going to try and do radical politics within the university,” but trying to radicalize in a kind of theoretical, disciplinary way the university itself and the disciplines.

Cohen: So there was a commitment to the being in the university and transforming it?

Beverley: Yes. In NAM, we often used a formula, attributed to Gramsci, which was “the long march through the institutions.” Gramsci was preoccupied with the idea that you don’t win power just by taking over institutions, because they still have their own logic and structure—you could take them over, but they’d still do their thing—so you had to transform the institution itself. Of course, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, although it seemed a bit distant and weird, nevertheless resonated with us, the idea of somehow transforming things culturally fitted our model of the counterculture, too. And then there was all this new thought coming in from England and Europe.

Cohen: You mean Eurocommunism?

Beverley: Well, more theoretical. Eurocommunism was certainly a factor, but more the theoretical stuff—Raymond Williams, the French structuralists and poststructuralists, the Birmingham school—all that stuff was coming in and gave you a new sense of what you could do. You won’t believe how conservative the American academy was in the ’60s. It had pretty much eliminated almost all socialist or Marxist presence. Literature was pretty much formalist, New Critical kind of stuff, and even depoliticized New Critical stuff. I mean, you would never guess that William Empson had been a sympathizer of the Left. He was just a way of doing a certain kind of very depoliticized reading. There were a few people hanging on at the edges of the academy, Marcuse being one. Fredric Jameson—who was also at UC-San Diego—and Marcuse represented a new possibility for the academy in the ’60s, open to Marxism.

Cohen: Had Jameson done his book on the Frankfurt School yet?

Beverley: That's what he was writing when I met him, *Marxism and Form*. He had done his first book on Sartre. Walter Benjamin was very important then, to him, and I was also inspired to make sense of how to apply Benjamin to my own work.

Cohen: How so?

Beverley: Well, my particular field of interest was the Spanish Baroque, and Benjamin had this fantastic book on drama. It purports to be on German Baroque theater, but it's actually on Spanish Baroque theater. It's on allegory and Baroque disillusion, and despotism. So that was very helpful for me.

But Benjamin was also an opening to modernism and to popular culture. That was the other element. Because your university formation in the '60s was high modernist—either formalist or leftist, it doesn't matter—high modernism was the model. But your personal formation was in American popular culture. I watched a lot of TV, listened to rock 'n' roll, so you had this schizophrenic kind of situation personally, and because of Benjamin's interest and the particular inflection he gave to the Frankfurt School, his work lent itself to this dichotomy.

If you were coming from a Frankfurt School perspective, like Theodore Adorno, you would say that high culture is where the art resists capitalism and commodification. Not me. I liked Adorno, but my intellectual stance was more open to popular culture. And that's a Popular Front angle too, right?

I think those of us who formed the New Left, implicitly or explicitly, all had the idea that American popular culture, although there might have been many problems with it, was nevertheless enabling for the Left in a lot of ways. As Michael Denning has shown, it was a product of a prior process of radicalization. Somebody like Jameson would have been suspicious. You know, there's this famous essay by Adorno on jazz where he describes jazz as a commercial, deadening kind of music. None of us would have ever thought anything like that at all. Quite the contrary—Marcuse was celebrating jazz, Coltrane, stuff like that.

There is one other aspect that might be worth mentioning about the university and cultural studies angle of the late '60s, and it comes in with the French structuralists, and particularly with [Louis] Althusser—his famous essay on ideology, "Ideology and Ideological Practice." That was fundamental for my generation. Much more so than the more "scientific" Althusser.

Cohen: Why was that essay so pivotal?

Beverley: Because it was about the role ideology plays in the formation of class subjects, and because it made culture very central to Marxist and radical discussions. What Althusser says in the beginning of this essay is, "Yes, it is true that people are divided by relations of production—one's an owner of capital, and one has to work

for capital to make a living. But what does it take to make the person who has to work at the factory show up every day, and imagine that he or she has a meaningful life by doing that?" Now, that's ideology.

So ideology doesn't necessarily come after the economic relations of production—it's already built into the economic relations, and you can't think of class without it. That insight put questions of culture at the center of things and connected the counterculture of the United States, the hippy thing, to the resistance to capitalism. It did the same, in a very different kind of way, with the Cultural Revolution in China. The idea was to try and create a more egalitarian society, and that had to be not just an economic revolution, because the Chinese had nationalized [their economy]. It had to be a cultural thing. And feminism was the other big element coming out of the '60s.

All this legitimized the notion that you could stay in the university and do meaningful political work. It wasn't just a question of preferring to be in the university as opposed to doing community work or labor organizing.

Of course, it wasn't that I ignored the organizing side. I was involved in a faculty unionization campaign here in Pittsburgh. You'll see in that NAM brochure commemorating our ten year anniversary an advertisement, "Thanks to John Beverley for his work on behalf of faculty and unions." Now, it's important to keep in mind, most NAM people, although the majority were all pretty much university educated, didn't have much to do with university things.

Cohen: Chronologically, then, when you finished at San Diego, you came to Pittsburgh for your first job and encountered NAM?

Beverley: Yeah, I came here in 1969, in September, ABD. And then I finished my degree three years later in 1972. That's about when NAM appeared in Pittsburgh—1972. And then I'm pretty active in NAM all through the '70s, much to the expense of my academic career—without abandoning the academic career. Then in the '80s after the merger with DSOC, I start to get less active with DSA and more active in Latin American solidarity work, particularly with the Central Americans, with the Sandinistas. I did a book at the end of the '80s called *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolution* as a way of combining an academic interest with a political interest, trying to give a sort of theoretical expression to solidarity politics.

Cohen: Do you remember how you came across NAM?

Beverley: I do. I had a friend in economics, a guy called Dave Houston, also a Marxist, and he told me, "Why don't you come to a meeting?" I never heard of NAM before. I was more in an academic mode at the time. So, I started going to the meetings and I liked the people; it seemed to me a sensible way to carry forward something that I had liked about SDS. And I was getting interested in Eurocommunism at the time, too, and NAM seemed close to that. And soon after I joined, a large number of people from the American CP

who had more of a Eurocommunist perspective, started coming into NAM, or at least getting close to it. Dorothy Healey was probably the most significant of these folks for me, because I got to know Dorothy pretty well.

Cohen: What was it like working with someone like Dorothy Healey, from the Old Left, being motivated as you were by this New Left analysis of culture? Even though, as Denning points out, there's this huge flowering of proletarian and Popular Front culture as a result of the CP, the Old Left was much more fraught regarding culture's relationship to socialist strategy. They might have said, "Well, you know, the proletarian literary stuff is great, but really, we were more interested in organizing the autoworkers."

Beverly: Well, on the other hand, you could say about the CP and other left-wing organizations in the '30s, they did take culture seriously. They read magazines, staged debates, and sponsored artists. The fact that Frank Sinatra took part in the Popular Front because some guy in the CP thought it would be good to have an Italian American singer, that seems all quite good. And leftists went into the movie industry. That's good, too, I think.

Whereas the more tight-ass CP [laughs] that emerges after 1948, in the context of the Cold War was not going to say too much about that; they were more Sovietized. But Dorothy was a Popular Front person, without herself being particularly a cultural person. I mean she was an organizer. Then, the other thing that comes into the picture is Gramsci.

Cohen: Did Gramsci show up on your horizon at UC San Diego through Althusser or after?

Beverly: No, I was actually into Althusser before Gramsci. I was reading Marcuse, Fanon, Che, Foucault, Malcolm X, Regis Debray. I knew Gramsci was there, but I hadn't read him seriously until way after that—with NAM. NAM had a very Gramscian element in it. There was at least one important U.S. Gramscian who was connected closely to NAM, Carl Marzani. If I'm not mistaken, Carl published the first translation of Gramsci in the U.S., way before the famous selections from *The Prison Notebooks* put out in the late '50s, early '60s.

Another guy who was very influential in putting Gramsci on the map in the United States—which made it a little bit problematic for us to get close to him, for my generation, anyway—was the historian of slavery who later on became a neocon—Eugene Genovese. Genovese was one of the top intellectuals of the American Communist Party and very much Gramscian, but a kind of elitist articulation of Gramsci.

Anyway, like a lot of people who end up being neocon who were leftist in the '60s, Genovese hated the New Left; he and his cohort thought the New Left was narcissistic and lacked a sense of organization and discipline. If you look at New Left publications—anthologies of the late '60s and early '70s—you'll see they're all "Genovese vs. somebody from the New Left." So Gramsci came a little bit later for me.

Cohen: What was that like finding Gramsci? One of the interesting things about critical theory today is that it seems so rarified—really just a practice associated with graduate-level university work in the humanities. You would never expect to find a political party forming now to be reading Gramsci, or whomever Gramsci would be today. But when you started going to NAM meetings, did it seem normal?

Beverley: Well, NAM as a whole was very much an activist organization. I would say Gramsci was more of an influence on the ideologues, of which I was one, of NAM. I was the ideologue for foreign issues within NAM. You'll see I wrote an essay justifying why we could join with DSOC despite the fact they had this terrible Cold War record. There was this new conjuncture, an anti-imperialist kind of thing, and the European socialists supported the Sandinistas, so that created a kind of new dynamic, whereas back in the '60s they would have been against someone who was communist. And there were other ideologues: Dorothy Healey's son, Richard was very much in touch with Third World, European, and Latin American intellectuals. We had good relations with a lot of Italians of the extra-parliamentary Left, and with the French, and Puerto Ricans, and Venezuelans—I was just rereading in one of the NAM *Discussion Bulletins* an article I wrote about a Venezuelan socialist party called "The Movement to Socialism" that emerged out of the break-up of the Venezuelan CP and the guerrilla movement. I was proposing that as a model for NAM—a kind of an electoral formation for the Left.

We did take internationalism seriously, even though we saw ourselves very much as an American-rooted thing. I mean, the name . . . it sounds like a business association or something like that, right? [laughs]

Cohen: That brings up a question I have about the way NAM functioned internally. One of the things I think really sets NAM apart from its contemporaries is its focus on forming a mass movement. But what I've read in the *Discussion Bulletin* suggests that there was always this tension between building a mass movement and trying to form a cadre that could do that. Is that accurate?

Beverley: Yes. You could say there were two tendencies in NAM, one of which was more locally oriented. NAM was extremely local, even ideologically. So, some chapters would go off in a particular direction. I remember there was a chapter in North Carolina, I think it was the Durham chapter—it became Maoist and eventually split from NAM. Then there was a terrible event where they had a big demonstration against the Ku Klux Klan in Greensborough, and many members of that chapter were shot. The Klan had weapons.

They were all former NAM comrades. But they formed this Maoist thing and decided to try and take on the Klan directly. And they got shot down. Many were killed—five, six, seven—people I knew . . . with impunity. I don't think the people who shot them were ever tried or anything like that.

Cohen: I heard that story just a couple of years ago. I was astounded something like that could actually happen. Both the shooting as well as the nature of the opposition to the Klan from the Left.

Beverley: They were a strong group and they were organized, particularly around health workers in this North Carolina city. NAM had a strong presence in North Carolina, for reasons I was never quite sure of. I guess North Carolina was industrialized, and maybe there was a space for a radical group to develop. But they were strong enough to pose the very idea of taking on the Klan, which especially in North Carolina is not an easy thing. I mean, they got slammed, but at least they posed that idea.

So there were a lot of local initiatives, but at the same time, the national organization was less coherent. In that way, we were very different than DSOC, because DSOC was all national big stars but very little local presence. Maybe you were a member of DSOC in Pittsburgh, but there were no meetings. They weren't organizing anywhere.

NAM's localism is an SDS feature, by the way. SDS put a lot of emphasis on local organizing. The argument was that it was essentially more authentic than having a national political base because you're dealing with people's needs and you're not just bullshitting. In that way, I was uncharacteristic of NAM. I was an intellectual and talking about big ideas, Eurocommunism and stuff like that.

Cohen: How'd that go over?

Beverley: Okay. I mean, I was a part of NAM, and the ethos—the intellectual and cultural ethos at NAM—was very much dependent on the analysis of social and political conditions, worldwide as well as nationally. I mean, NAM was not anti-intellectual.

Cohen: I agree. I think the *Discussion Bulletin* reads like *Social Text* or some kind of heavyweight cultural theory journal at times. The issues are dense, the theory is sophisticated, though directed towards practical and everyday issues, as well as more particular debates about the theory itself. For a group that was very locally oriented towards energy or health care policy, the *Discussion Bulletin* reflects an intense theoretical focus as well.

Beverley: That's true. I think what makes NAM different and the *Discussion Bulletin* different than, say, a journal like *Socialist Review*—which politically we had a lot in common with at the time—is that in the *Discussion Bulletin* we were taking seriously the idea of trying to unite theory and practice and to create a new organization in the Left. *Socialist Review* was an intellectual review about concepts of socialism (for which a lot of NAM people, myself included, wrote). Being a member of NAM, as opposed to just being a socialist intellectual, meant that I took seriously the idea of trying to create an organization in the Left. And so the discussions in NAM, you're right, do have a lot of theoretical, and cultural, political science angles. But they're all related to a project, a practical project.

And that makes it a little bit different than New Left thinking in general.

Cohen: Right. What you say points to a significant aspect of NAM which is hard to imagine today, and that's its members' belief in the project of building a mass movement for socialism. It's hard in 2007 to imagine that felt real and possible.

Beverley: I don't think we ever thought we got to the stage of building a mass movement. The chapters were very local. There was a kind of—almost like an entropy—that set in where, if the chapter got to be more than forty active people—and that's about what it was at the height in Pittsburgh—it would just split. Forty was the limit [laughs]; you couldn't go beyond that. And that's because there was a New-Lefty-kind of affinity group aspect to it. We weren't really a party. I mean, you can be a member of a party without necessarily wanting to spend the evening with somebody, right? But in NAM, this New Left idea of an affinity group was a real part of the movement. The notion that we were all a community of sorts was very important to the organizational aspect of the movement.

That was good in one way because it kept a strong local structure. I mean, that's the kind of structure that allows you to say, "Okay, we're going to take on the Klan." Because that must have been a collective discussion. People sat around a table and said, "What's going to be our next political project?" And somebody said, "Why don't we take on the Klan?" Okay, well these are the pros, these are the cons—debate, decision . . .

But the limitation was that you couldn't open yourself up to a larger community that didn't want to be members full-time. And that's what I would call the political dimension. Where NAM didn't have a political presence at the national level in America, at the local level, it could have a very strong political presence. I think we were, for a time anyway, the main force on the Left in Pittsburgh. There were other Left organizations, but we were the most influential.

Cohen: You said earlier there was a fear of being too much like a political party. Was the structure of NAM held back in one sense because of its formation out of the New Left radical democratic tendency?

Beverley: Yes. Community organizing was seen as the key place to construct a movement for socialism. You have to show people that you could actually do things for them, like the group in North Carolina that took on the Klan. You have to show people "Well, we can take on the Klan"—or here we can create an ambulance service—one chapter project was to create an ambulance service for poor communities. Those were the kinds of projects that seemed, at least in the early days of NAM, to have a lot of authority. Those of us who were more intellectual who felt, well, we have to generate an idea of socialism as a kind of alternative in American life, had less prestige.

DSOC, on the other hand, had this national presence—it created a presence for socialism in American life and it had national politi-

cal figures, and we had this very powerful set of locals in about twenty or thirty major cities. It seemed like a marriage made in heaven, if we could solve the ideological issues.

Cohen: Right. And by that time, the early '80s, they seemed more in line with NAM?

Beverly: Yes and no. I mean, they still were pretty much the Old Left. They were older, very trade union-oriented, part of the left-wing of the Democratic Party—these things didn't have much meaning for us. We were all involved with trade unions, but they were new trade unions, like SEIU, teachers unions. We weren't involved in the old traditional industrial unions at all, whereas DSOC had autoworkers, steelworkers . . . And there were other issues. I mean, we took seriously their antiCommunism. It's not that we were gung-ho about the Soviet Union and China, for example—we thought they were authoritarian and fucked-up in lots of ways—but we didn't have that "anti-Communist" thing; quite the contrary. DSOC, even when they were against the Vietnam War, still had that Cold War anti-Communism.

And another big issue was Israel. We were split about Israel, and that was a very important debate that has repercussions that are evident today. Our official position was like that of most of the Left in the '60s: we supported a binational secular state. We felt Israel should stop being just the state of the Jewish people. Israel and the West Bank should be one state with Palestinians and Jews sharing it.

But that changed in the '70s, and Dorothy Healey was one of the architects of that shift. I was involved with international stuff and got caught right in the middle of it. And I didn't like it, but I went along with it. Maybe it was a mistake. It had to do with creating the conditions for the merger with DSOC, which shifted our position to the two-state solution, to which, by that time, the Palestinian movement and the Israeli Left had also shifted. I didn't particularly like that and a lot of comrades didn't like that idea at the time, but we went along with it. We said, "Okay to the Palestinian state . . . the Israeli Left says it's okay, Dorothy Healey says it's okay, so, we'll go with it." And that allowed us to merge with DSOC. Had we stayed firm with a two-state solution, the merger with DSOC wouldn't have worked. They were very pro-Israel.

We were all pretty much convinced that Israel had gone bad. I was not even opposed to saying that Israel was developing a system like apartheid, for which I was beaten up, you know. "You're saying too much." "How can you say that, John? I mean, South Africa." [laughs] I don't know what your position is on Israel, but I don't think it worked out all that well. It is a kind of semi-apartheid. But Israel was still quite social-democratic at the time. Now, it's become a neo-liberal sort of economy.

Cohen: So DSOC's support of Israel was because of Israel's kind of socialism, not necessarily because DSOC had active Jewish members that supported Israel?

Beverley: Both. DSOC is a New York organization—I mean if we took the New York out of DSOC there wouldn't be too much left [laughs]. And I would say that was also a tendency among a certain sector of the American CP that affiliated with Eurocommunism, people like Dorothy Healey, who were also quite pro-Israel.

Cohen: What's your take on the merger now?

Beverley: Oh, it was a big mistake. A lot of my friends told me that and I was one of the ideological architects.

Cohen: Well, it makes sense if you think about it on paper. NAM has an amazing local structure and DSOC has a national presence—why not join the two?

Beverley: Exactly. I'm not sure what happened, to be honest. Several things happened at once. Everything moved to the Right very fast after Reagan, much faster than anyone could have imagined. You asked me earlier what did it feel like to think in the '70s if we had the possibility for creating socialism; we did feel that we had the possibility. Now, I wouldn't say that we would have bet our homes or marriages on it, but we thought it was possible to build a network of socialism in the United States within our lifetimes. The Soviet Union was still going. It was fucked-up, but it was there, and that gave us a sense that there were alternatives in the world. You know, the '60s explosion around the world—the anticolonial movements included—had had a very powerful effect in American life, which also had its own tremendous changes; that opened up all kinds of possibilities.

I would say things were still open, up to and including the Rainbow Coalition, which was either the culmination, or the last gasp, of that upsurge. But the idea of the Rainbow Coalition was entirely plausible, that you could have a coalition from the Left—women, labor, farmers, gays—that could be an electoral majority. I think that's still true. I'm a little less optimistic now. My vision is more that the U.S. has sort of entered a kind of decadence—you know, it can't be resolved because everybody's tied into the structure in some kind of way or another. There are possibilities of change, but something will always arise to block it or disorganize the potential historical bloc that could produce a new stage of American life. That's a better way to explain what I think today. But in the '70s I didn't think that at all. I thought, "No, this is quite possible."

But things went to the Right very fast. Some people said, "Well, that justifies the merger," because in a way, we were just trying to keep the ship afloat in a situation which was looking increasingly negative. But actually I think—while I understand some of the logic of that argument—maybe it would have been better to keep the ship afloat leaving NAM as it was, without the merger. The merger sort of killed off NAM without enriching DSOC. DSA now is pretty much what DSOC was. They've got bureaucrats and unions, but they don't have a local organization. They don't have rank-and-file chapters in the way NAM did. They don't have that kind of allegiance of people.

Cohen: How come the DSOC segment remained so coherent and NAM was so disarticulated?

Beverley: I don't think DSOC benefited all that much from the merger. They're still the same organization they were in the late '70s with no organic presence. A lot of union functionaries but, even in unions, no real rank-and-file presence. Some people suggested that we could have merged to the left instead of to the right. DSOC was to our right, while there were other organizations like International Socialists that had a strong presence in the Teamsters Union; we could have merged with them. It is interesting to think what might have happened in that case. They were more like us in the sense of actually putting people into organizing.

Cohen: What about that merger changed NAM? I mean, it would seem not much would have to change from NAM's perspective, especially at the local level where there wasn't much of a DSOC presence to affect the workings of the chapters in a significant way.

Beverley: I'm not completely sure how to answer that. It could be that a lot of the top leadership got drawn off into DSOC/DSA upper-level kinds of activities, so maybe that drained initiative from the locals.

Another problem that emerged, which I'm not sure I want to blame DSOC for because it was endemic to our own model of organization, was the "donut problem." Have you run across that concept? The "donut problem" is that all the top organizers—even myself, in a way—we're all active on these different fronts: so-and-so's working in health; so-and-so's working on food for poor people; so-and-so's working on a project to revive the steel industry. So who's working on NAM? It's a hole at the center; that's the donut. There's no organizational presence of NAM as NAM anymore. The affinity group model decayed until you didn't have meetings anymore, where you all sat down and thought about how to move things forward.

There was also something like the "kiss of death" about DSOC [laughs]. Do you know what I mean? I don't know why because they weren't bad people, and some of them were really NAM people who just happened to fall into DSOC instead of NAM.

But there was this older Socialist Party group—the kind of veterans of the '60s who had been through all those debates—and they sort of chilled everything. They had very bureaucratic conceptions of organization and they were good-intentioned, but they were a different generation. They weren't as rooted as I think NAM was in the '60s, and the whole transformation in American life itself. One of the virtues of being local—there are many problems with being local—but one of the virtues is that you have to pay attention to what's going on. If you're sitting in an office in New York, you don't really have to. NAM was very "American," in a good way. And DSOC wasn't, in a funny kind of way.

Cohen: That was certainly NAM's contribution to socialist politics. From what I've seen in the literature that was circulated leading up

to its formation, especially in Michael Lerner's essay calling for a "New American Movement," that was one of the innovations it proposed. It also points to its Gramscian orientation, since it suggests a sense of the need to be very particular about the conditions and common-sense politics of America, and to be rooted in its culture and life.

Beverley: Yes. We were tuned in to American popular culture—DSOC wasn't. DSOC was New York cultural elitism.

Cohen: The same impact wasn't felt when folks from the Old Left came to NAM, such as Dorothy Healey?

Beverley: No, but more because they tended to be more the out-in-the-boondocks type of communist, not New York communist.

Maybe the best way to put it is that NAM began to cease to have an organizational life as such in Pittsburgh after the merger. When I was most heavily involved, say '72 to '80, I was meeting at least once a week and maybe more if I was involved in some kind of leadership [laughs]—maybe, two, three, four times a week—heavy meetings, you know.

Cohen: Some of the records from chapters about meeting schedules I've seen are just astounding. I mean, you could have gone to a meeting every day, maybe even twice a day.

Beverley: That's right. And there were debates and splits that had to be solved . . . it was a pretty intense. On top of that, I was still working at the university, in my department, with the faculty union. But NAM was certainly the heaviest of all those things I was doing in the '70s, which is one of the reasons I didn't publish very much. I look at my CV [laughs]—there's my dissertation and I published some of the papers I wrote as a graduate student and then there was a big gap and the publications picked up again around 1981-82. It's not that I stopped writing; I wrote a lot. I discovered going over some of the NAM stuff that I wrote a lot for NAM. It was a central focus of my life, and it ceased to be after the merger with DSOC. For whatever reasons, it just didn't have that same kind of "pull" that it had.

Cohen: That's universally been true from the people I've talked to. The merger didn't do what they expected. But then a lot of it was the '80s and people were completely floored by Reagan.

Beverley: Yes, by how popular he was among people we would have liked to been addressing. And I think also a big turning point for everybody in DSA was its failure to get behind the Jackson candidacy in 1984. Remember Jackson launched his first candidacy in 1984; it didn't go very far. But the DSA people—the bigwigs and to be honest, the NAM leadership could had been co-opted, too—thought that to get involved with Jackson and the Rainbow was a mistake because you would burn your bridges with the left-wing of the Democratic Party. That was the strategic vision, and it turned out to be an ex-

pensive error, in my opinion. I understand being cautious about burning your bridges, because we now have the experience of all the people who voted Green in 2000 and allowed Bush to come into power, but I'm not sure that was exactly what was at stake because Rainbow was a movement within the Democratic Party; it wasn't a third-party movement. Clinton just took the Rainbow idea and gave it a more centrist political articulation, and it was a great success politically.

But I remember the DSA leadership considering this; it was a big debate at the time about whether to support the Rainbow, which, in Pittsburgh anyway, was a very promising political idea. For one thing, for the first time it brought together black and white activists. All through this history there's only a few blacks in NAM.

Cohen: What's your take on that?

Beverley: That goes back to the New Left, and the fact that the origins of the New Left are primarily in the white, middle-class student Left. Of course, all of us were involved in the civil rights movement, and so the racial issue was very prominent. But after the civil rights movement there emerged a kind of funny "separate but equal" model, right? There would be a white Left and then there would be a black Left.

I remember being involved in Rainbow both in 1984 and in 1988—very at the edges, but still involved—going to meetings and there you would see black and white leftists, community activists, together, talking to each other about what are we going to do and how are we going to organize this and how are we going to that, and I had never seen that before in the whole history in the time I was involved with the New Left.

So I think that was a very promising thing, if somehow the Rainbow would have become hegemonic within the Democratic Party. True, once Jackson's candidacy deteriorated, you know, then the Rainbow fell apart too. But after 1984, there wasn't too much left. And then if you got involved in the Rainbow in 1988, you weren't getting locked in as a NAM member or a DSA member, you were getting involved because you liked that idea politically.

Cohen: Do you think part of the transition away from NAM and DSA and socialism more generally to single issue campaigns has to do with the fall of the Soviet Union?

Beverley: Yes. Absolutely. I think of it in terms of the French Revolution—it happens, and then there's a period afterward as Napoleon is defeated—"The Restoration." All the monarchies and the church get back together again. That's the way I look at the history of the late-twentieth century. There was this radical upsurge in the '60s, but then both internally and externally, it reached some kinds of limit. And now we're in a Restoration [laughs]. Now, Restorations last for a long time, but they don't last forever. You can already see elements of that in Latin America, where the Left was thoroughly defeated, just crushed in the '80s. Now it's resurgent again and shows the pop-

ular base for a socialist project is still present. I don't see that yet in the United States. But I think that the idea of socialism is beginning, a little bit, to come back.

But there's no question that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a real disaster, and a surprise. Because all of us thought that even though it was fucked-up in lots of ways, nevertheless that it was going to, in time, evolve in a more democratic direction and that these were growing pains, in part resulting from socialism having come into being in a very underdeveloped country with lots of authoritarian political traditions. But that idea that it would just simply collapse! You know . . . [laughs] . . . disappear! I mean, that was a real shocker.

And I think that makes it difficult for people today to think of socialism as a possibility. To my daughter, who is nineteen, socialism is an idea she might study, but I don't think she considers it as a real force in the world, an alternative vision. Cuba's not a model anymore. Even the Cubans don't say their country is model for socialism; instead, they say, "We're in a special period." That's the way they officially describe it because of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The characteristic of the "special period" is that they're not a model of what a socialist society could look like. These are just emergency measures that they take to try and hold things together. There is no model.

Cohen: One NAM member I talked to recalled that many people felt with the Soviet Union gone, the American Left could articulate itself as a socialist party or a tendency without that albatross of the Soviet Union. But without the Soviet Union there, the idea of socialism itself just seemed to become rootless.

Beverley: Yes, I agree with that. The albatross was the necessary condition, in a way. We were very hopeful in the '80s, like a lot of people, that the Gorbachev reforms would lead to a democratic and economic and cultural invigoration of the Soviet Union. But actually, it seems like the opposite happened. They destroyed the Soviet Union. It was too much, too soon. [laughs] The hope was that it would look like Sweden or something, a strong presence for socialism in the world.

Cohen: When NAM was active, did people talk about socialism openly?

Beverley: Yes. But we didn't have a very clear idea of it, and there were a lot of debates about people's power versus nationalization; is it socialism just because you nationalize something? I don't think anyone had a really concrete idea about what socialism would look like, except it would be a more egalitarian, people-oriented kind of society.

There was also a slight Maoist strain in all of this. Probably nobody's going to admit to it these days, but it was definitely there at the time [laughs]. Not that NAM was Maoist, although some people were more or less sympathetic, but you know, that whole "cultural

revolution” thing fit with feminism because it was contesting role models. Feminism was very powerful in NAM, and the organization was famous for powerful women leaders.

And we were serious about that, socialist-feminism. Of the many things that I think were wrong about NAM, I’m not sure that’s one of them. Feminism was beginning to emerge as a powerful movement, and that idea of linking socialism to something that was emerging, that wasn’t such a bad idea.

Cohen: Some of the people I’ve talked to have said that was also one of the more difficult things for the men in NAM . . . not difficult, but a real challenge to grapple with—their own chauvinism, and sexism, what socialist-feminism would mean in terms of forging an egalitarian society, and how to make that happen in the present. Would you say that was accurate, that within NAM, this was not a problem, but something that had to constantly be worked out?

Beverley: Yes. And not only between men and women, but also between women and women. Most NAM chapters, including ours, had the practice of “criticism/self-criticism.” Literally, at the end of every meeting, it would be “Now we’re going to have criticism/self-criticism,” and then people supposedly are going to speak their minds. You know, “I thought Beverley’s intervention on the international question was sexist and demeaning to Jane,” or vice-versa. It’s slightly different than discussion about the politics, because then you’re discussing whether to do a project or not, what resources you’re going to need, whether it’s going to have good consequences or not. This was more about personal interactions, and you could criticize yourself; you could say, “Well, I think I really wasn’t attentive enough to the collective,” or “I apologize for that.” We took it somewhat seriously—it’s a difficult thing. It sounds better in theory than it actually worked out in practice. But at least we made an effort to do it.

Of course, the larger problems that NAM ran into were structural, more than personal. We didn’t have a national political projection. We couldn’t project beyond the local, in the sense that we didn’t really exist beyond local instances. There was no national organization. We would meet nationally, every now and then—and there was an office in Chicago—but that was a limitation, I think. That was what we were going to solve with the merger with DSOC. But maybe it would have been better to have waited a little bit to see.

And then there was the black/white split; that was a problem we never solved. Too easily, we said, “Okay, well, black people will have their own organizations, and we’ll have this organization.” That was easy and black people seemed content with that, too, because of the Panther model, but in retrospect, I think that was a real mistake. Maybe an inevitable mistake, because we were what we were and the black struggle had a very different dynamic.

That was the moment of the Panthers and black nationalism, and post-Panther stuff, and a lot of bright, young, black people—very militant in Pittsburgh in the ’70s—were involved with that. And we just never could find a way to not only integrate them into the organiza-

tion, but even to work closer with them. We had good relations with them, but we never could develop common projects. If we had really taken the issue of race seriously, we would have said, "Now we have to think more seriously about working together, forming a new organization, linking to both and we wouldn't be limited just to people like us." But when you start to do that, other kinds of complications appear. The affinity group starts to disappear and you have to deal with many more kinds of tough contradictions than you do in a NAM-styled self-criticism.

I'm not sure we understood how deeply racism was ingrained in American life. I mean, we all came out in the civil rights movement and maybe we thought things were changing, pretty rapidly—that racism was on the way out. I don't think we understood how structurally racism is deeply located in American life and very hard to overcome. If I had to say what the main contradiction in American life was, I wouldn't say the class contradiction between workers and capital, I take the contradictions between whites and blacks.

And the Hispanics . . . I'm not even sure most people in NAM were even aware [laughs] there was a growing Hispanic population in the United States. We had relations with the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, and they had a presence in Chicago and New York, and we would talk with them every now and then. We sort of felt, "Well, they'll take care of that," but the notion that fifteen percent of the U.S. population was going to be Hispanic, not even I, who was teaching Spanish, imagined this would happen. We supported the farm workers, César Chávez, but we didn't specifically have anything on Hispanics. That would have been very far-seeing, if we could have anticipated that.

Cohen: I'm pretty impressed with how far-reaching NAM's political, social, and cultural analysis went.

Beverley: Sure. Even the affinity model of social organization, there's a lot to be said for it. I mean, it has its limits, but it is like a collective. You're part of something where your individual activities are supplemented and multiplied in a way that just adding one person working in the academy, one person working on health, one person working on this, doesn't quite get. We did create a presence.

Afterwards, when I went back into academic work in a smaller project called "The Latin American Subaltern Studies Group"—there were only about ten or twelve of us—we modeled ourselves on this group of Indian historians who called themselves "The Subaltern Studies Group." It was a small collective, and we used to meet once or twice a year without any kind of institutional support, and just exchange ideas over a weekend and think of developing some projects together. And, you know, that had a tremendous effect. It really gives you, as NAM did, a sense of what the power of collective work is as opposed to just individual work. How collectives—a working collective—can accomplish things.

To the extent that socialism is connected to the idea of collectives, I have no doubts about that at all. It's a pain in the ass sometimes, working in collectives, but the consequences of what you do are re-

ally quite different than you just doing brilliant individual work. I could be the most brilliant Marxist literary scholar in the United States, but that's quite different than a collective and ten or twelve Marxists working in a particular area and trying to have an effect on that area. And that's more of a collective as opposed to an individual kind of work. The NAM model had that collective thing. And that's somehow what we lost when they merged with DSOC.

