

Interview with Victor Wallis

Victor Cohen

A pivotal moment in **Victor Wallis's** political formation was his experience living in Chile during the period leading up to Salvador Allende's election as president in 1970. Soon after returning to the United States, Wallis began his career as a political science professor and joined the New University Conference. While spending a sabbatical in Italy in 1977, Wallis met Joanne Barkan, a NAM member also living abroad who wrote for the newspaper *Il Manifesto*; she suggested that when he returned to the U.S., he should join NAM, which he did. Upon joining, Wallis worked to form a NAM chapter in Indianapolis, the city where he was teaching, but eventually became an at-large member instead. He was active in many arenas, particularly around Latin American politics and U.S. imperialism. When NAM merged with the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), Wallis, along with one-third of the NAM membership, chose to leave the organization rather than become a member of the newly-formed Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Wallis currently teaches in the Liberal Arts department at the Berklee College of Music and is the managing editor of *Socialism and Democracy*. He also writes for *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* and the *Monthly Review*. His recent works include "Interpreting Revolution: *Che: Part I and Part II*," *Jump Cut*, 51 (2009) and "Socialism and Technology: A Sectoral Overview" in Anatole Anton and Richard Schmitt (eds.), *Toward a New Socialism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

Victor Cohen: How did you hear about NAM?

Victor Wallis: I had heard about it from the beginning; at the time it was founded, I was a member of the New University Conference [NUC], which I joined in 1969 and which dissolved in 1972. Those were the years when my children were very young—they were born in 1967 and 1971—and I was a young professor with all the pressure of getting tenure, and I didn't feel I could join another organization that would make demands on my time. NUC was somewhat similar to NAM in style and character, and although it didn't have that much of a material impact on actual cases around universities, I think it had an enormous impact on a generation of people who came through it. Certainly it did on me. It helped determine where I would teach for a long time—the urban campus of a state institution in Indiana—and it also had an influence on my approach to teaching. I could see that NAM was similar to this, but I just didn't have time to get involved.

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The New University Conference was essentially an organization for radical graduate students and faculty committed to working—as they put it—in, around, and in spite of the university system. It was working to break down the various barriers within the university as well, including crossing the lines between professional and working-class staff, identifying with the students, introducing radical pedagogy. One of its offshoots was the journal *Radical Teacher*.

Cohen: Where did you encounter NUC? At graduate school?

Wallis: Well, I was at Columbia for graduate school, but that's not where I first encountered NUC. I spent the summer of 1969, after my first year of teaching, in Berkeley, California, and I went to some radical event where I met someone from the organization. And he said, "Why don't you join?" (Laughs.) That was a pretty exciting summer—rallies for the Black Panther Party, that sort of thing. NUC was a group of people with occupations similar to what I was doing, and although it was focused on universities, it was interested in the full range of issues. It took stands on foreign policy questions and on all kinds of domestic issues. It was very strong on women's liberation, on fighting racism, so it was very congenial [to NAM's outlook]. At the same time, while it had radical positions on those issues, it was not a party-type of group, especially in the classic Left party mode, with strong discipline, lines, and that kind of thing. It had space for different tendencies, which was the way I felt. I guess as soon as I really started to think about things and do serious work, my analyses were within a Marxist framework. But beyond that, I was open to whatever the reality of the situation was, as was NUC.

Cohen: Had you come from a Left background?

Wallis: No, not at all. (Laughs.) I had nothing of that in my immediate family.

Cohen: How do you account for your own gravitation to the Left?

Wallis: Oh, it was a kind of temperamental thing from childhood, reacting against social injustice, social polarization, wherever I witnessed it.

Cohen: Did graduate school affect your outlook?

Wallis: I graduated from Harvard in 1960, and then I first went into the History of Ideas program at Brandeis, during the period when Herbert Marcuse was there, although I ended up not doing much with him. But I encountered a very congenial group of students there, so it was a good experience. I got a master's degree, and then left. The History of Ideas program was a little bit too arcane for my tastes. I wanted stuff that was more directly related to immediate struggles. I eventually got back into political science, and that's what my doctorate from Columbia is in, with an emphasis on Latin American studies.

I would say that my main intellectual influence was the *Monthly Review*, which I ended up writing for. But at that time, I discovered it in the library and simply started reading it. It had a powerful analysis and a

straightforward way of describing things, and it was written in a style that was not overly rhetorical or demagogic, unlike the political rhetoric you find in some of the party publications. It communicated, and I liked that. I visited the editors in 1962, and one of them gave me the idea of focusing on Latin American studies, which I hadn't thought of until then, but which suddenly made all kinds of sense. I eventually spent a year in Chile—I got a Fulbright in the middle of my graduate studies—and that's where I did my research. It was a very formative year, 1966-67. Chile was very open, and people from all over Latin America were there. You would go to political events, and coming out of the U.S., for the first time, you'd be surrounded by people who had the same sentiments—thousands of people. And of course, by the time I came back, there was also that here in the United States. Just in that one year there was a tremendous shift.

Cohen: So you weren't involved with SDS?

Wallis: No, in fact, I wasn't. I was on the periphery of it. I subscribed to *New Left Notes*, and so I knew what was going on, but I was in a kind of odd situation. I was a little older than the founders of SDS—maybe four or five years older—and had come of age in an extremely repressive environment, and in a family that was not at all supportive of the Left. So my political formation was very much theoretical—an enormous amount of reading—and also on a separate track from my day-to-day activities. I guess spending one's high-school and undergraduate years under the pall of McCarthyism, one got to be very careful of what one said.

So my personal lifestyle was really formed in a period of repression, and I didn't have the same personal culture as the people of SDS. At least that's how I felt initially. Gradually there was a convergence. Some people in NUC spoke of the organization as the graduate school of SDS. A lot of its members had come out of SDS. People said something similar about NAM. So it wasn't that I didn't share the broad perspectives. I went to SDS-sponsored demonstrations and had friends in the group, but I just didn't feel that I was part of it. Later, things opened up for me. By that time, I had lived within this politically supportive environment on the campuses. All that is by way of explaining how my politics were similar to the spectrum that was contained within SDS, but I never actually joined.

Cohen: So when did you come across NAM?

Wallis: I spent a sabbatical semester in Italy in the spring of 1977, a very active period. That was the height of the Italian Communist Party's influence, but at the same time, there was a terrific movement on the left of the Communist Party driven by the frustration that they were doing too little. There was an amazing ferment at that time. The paper that I found there which represented the intellectual and political framework that I could identify with was *Il Manifesto*. I ended up meeting someone who wrote for them, Joanne Barkan; she was a member of NAM and told me all about them, encouraged me to join, and I did. I don't remember exactly when I joined. I went to the 1979 and 1981 conventions, so I must have joined sometime around 1978. I was living in Indianapolis and was never able to form a chapter. I made some efforts, was active in a lot of

local, single-issue campaigns of one kind or another, but I was still somewhat limited in the time and energy I could devote to political work. Let's say I'd latch onto things rather than try to initiate them.

Cohen: What was the world of the Left like where you were teaching?

Wallis: Well, the Left in Indianapolis was quite small. The one good thing about it from my point of view was that it was so small that all the different sectors could know each other, fit in the same room. I'm comparing it with the Boston area where I live now, where the Left is much bigger, as is the metropolitan area, which is broken up into all these separate cities. Indianapolis was a city of three quarters of a million with a minuscule Left, so we all knew each other. (Laughs.) It was a very conservative general atmosphere. The media were extremely conservative. Both morning and evening papers were owned by the same reactionary right-wing family, so one felt somewhat besieged.

What was interesting about that atmosphere was that the rank-and-file activists of the Democratic Party were quite progressive, so I had appreciative audiences when I'd speak. I'd speak mostly about Latin American issues, especially during the crises over Nicaragua, Central America, El Salvador. I did quite a lot of speaking. I'd get invited to all sorts of labor and church groups, basically by people who were active in the Democratic Party. But the notion of forming some organization that was outside the Democratic Party didn't seem to resonate with them.

Cohen: Why do you think NAM resonated with you?

Wallis: On the one hand, it had space for, and encouraged, radical analysis and activity, and yet at the same time, it was very open. The other thing about it is that there was some attention to let's say the quality of one's personal political activity, both at the conventions and in what they would write. I'm not saying that this was necessarily peculiar to NAM. I suppose all organizations had to deal with that question at some point or another, but with NAM it seemed to be quite front and center. There was an emphasis on leading by example, showing by the way one conducted one's own affairs what kind of model one had of how people should be with each other.

Cohen: I'm still impressed by the tremendous optimism NAM members had, and I mean this in the most basic sense, especially their willingness to confront the questions of how to produce a socialist-feminist movement in the U.S.

Wallis: I think a lot of the encouragement to that came from all over the world, because there was a continuous succession of mass events. The defeat of the U.S. in Vietnam was recognized as a kind of victory for liberation forces, and that took place in 1975. And then there was all that ferment that I experienced in Italy and of course in Latin America. I was very close to the events in Chile, and I wrote about that a lot. The Chilean process was quashed in 1973 by Pinochet, but after that came Nicaragua and Grenada.

Grenada from 1979 to 1983—that was a very exciting process. It is a minuscule island, but Maurice Bishop was a very magnetic speaker. I

never got a chance to see him when he toured the major cities in the U.S., but from what I heard, he was a tremendously appealing figure. Here was an authentic popular revolutionary leader whose native language was English. All this stuff was going on still. Even the Iranian revolution, before it congealed into the Islamic state, [was a source of inspiration]. The initial overthrow of the Shah in 1979, there were masses, thousands and thousands of people, and the culminating point of that whole thing was when the Shah's troops shot into the crowd but it didn't disperse; eventually the troops just couldn't take it and they simply gave in to the crowds, who forced the Shah out. I like to think now that something a little similar is going on with the developments in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and elsewhere.

Those were part of our surroundings at the time, and we had the recent experience of feeling a lot of our own power in the U.S., with the antiwar movement especially, the way it resonated not just in the student community but also way outside it, even into the ranks of the armed forces. Have you seen the film *Sir, No Sir?* It's a fabulous film that shows how that sentiment of revolt had become this generalized thing. Of course, the Black Panther Party had already been suppressed by the time I had joined NAM, but those groups as well were a recent memory.

Coming out of that, I wouldn't say NAM was that optimistic. Let's say the people who formed it had experienced a relative movement of things in their direction. And that feeling was reinforced by developments outside the U.S., in other countries. There was more of a sense that this was a long-haul type of thing, that we had to move carefully and not repeat the mistakes of earlier generations. It was a sober movement. There was a kind of confidence in a different future, but I wouldn't call it euphoria. There was definitely a sense that this was going to be a long struggle.

Cohen: So why did you leave when NAM merged with DSOC to form DSA?

Wallis: Well, I essentially saw DSOC as reflecting a political affiliation to the Democratic Party and a commitment to support party candidates. That was what the whole debate was about, and it was my desire to see a group that was entirely independent and that maintained its independence. That was pretty straightforward, I thought. The machinery of the Democratic Party overshadowed all that. Once you threw in your lot with the Democratic Party, all the other stuff would go by the wayside. The phenomenon was repeated on a somewhat different scale in the campaigns waged by Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988. I'm sure a lot of us supported him in both those campaigns, in the hopes that he would eventually build a movement, the Rainbow Coalition, but he resolutely refused to do anything outside the Democratic Party, and the Rainbow Coalition organizationally dissolved. That's the fate I'd anticipated as a result of NAM coming under the hegemony of the Democratic Party. I was just afraid that the movement, the organization, would lose its quality, its defining characteristics.

Cohen: In this context, what would you say were its defining characteristics? As opposed to other available movements or parties at the time?

Wallis: I saw it as a forum that could build a sector of opinion conducive to the formation of a party that could have widespread influence. That is to say, I did share the view that, ultimately, if one is acting politically, one needs a party, but I felt that the existing Left parties all had, let's say, insurmountable problems of one kind or another, and the Democratic Party was not capable of being transformed into a genuine, progressively-oriented party. The upper-reaches of the Democratic Party were irrevocably committed to capitalism, and so that was hopeless. You might say that by process of elimination, there was nothing else to join. On the far Left, there were groups that were essentially too rigidly defined, that I saw as not having the possibility of growing, and on the right there was this party that was irrevocably bound to capitalism. So NAM was something that occupied the space in between, and that I hoped could grow.

Cohen: Did part of that assessment relate to NAM's ability to attract the older CP members? If you saw NAM as a space between poles, did seeing members from the Old Left join suggest that NAM was also a vital part of the longer socialist tradition?

Wallis: For sure. It also suggested a space in which Marxism was taken seriously, which I think is essential, because whatever popular movement evolves, if it's going to be effective, it has to understand instinctively—or, at least in its leadership, more explicitly—what the structural obstacles to a popular program are. And that's where you need the analysis of capitalism—and the whole enterprise of Marxism. In other words, I think it was something positive, the fact that people who had their political formation within the [Communist] party subscribed (even if in too rigid a manner) to Marxism, and that they had evolved and were committing themselves to a framework that, in NAM, brought in new elements.

Cohen: So you must have left NAM around 1982?

Wallis: 1981.

Cohen: Did you get involved in any other Left organizations?

Wallis: Well, I was involved in a lot of local activity in Indianapolis and then later with some grassroots funding activities through the 1980s. My big commitment now is the journal *Socialism and Democracy*, which I've been working with since about 1993 or so.

Cohen: What was that transition like, out of NAM and into the 1980s, and then of course, seeing the fall of the Berlin Wall?

Wallis: Well, the early eighties had the tremendous focus on Central America, and I spent the year 1982-83 in Peru. I was directing the Indiana University study abroad program in Lima. It was a joint program between Indiana and California. There was huge debate in the U.S. at that time over the whole question of aid to the Contras, who were trying to put down the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. It was a lively topic in Peru as well. There was a lot of mobilization around that, and the issue continued right up through the mid-eighties and gave me a lot of opportunities to speak around Indianapolis.

Then I started gravitating back East and finally quit Indianapolis in 1994. But in the meantime, 1989, I was half here, half there, Boston and Indianapolis, and the falling of the [Berlin] wall for me—I immediately felt this was the end of one epoch of socialism but not the end of socialism. That was the thesis of my first article for *Socialism and Democracy* [1990], long before I became involved with the editorial work of the journal. I felt it was absolutely essential that socialism be kept alive and that its fate not be identified with the fate of these particular regimes. And there were actually a number of instances where I had to argue this directly with organizations. I remember two cases in particular. For a couple of years, I was on the board of the Brecht Forum in New York, the New York Marxist School. They actually had discussions about dropping the name “Marxist School,” and I argued vehemently against that. I was also involved with this ecological journal, for which I still write quite a lot, called *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*. Well, there was pressure for us to change the name and drop the reference to socialism. And so I said, especially now, this is exactly what they [the ruling class] want us to do. Let’s say I contributed to the effort to maintain these projects, under their actual names and identities.

This is where theory really came in. I recognized that just because these regimes had finally collapsed, it wasn’t only then that you saw there was something wrong with them. One could see that from way back. And that was never a reason to say that capitalism was the only solution. The problems of capitalism had existed before; they existed then, and they would continue to exist and necessitate an alternative.

The other thing I should mention, in terms of the continuity for me, is that though I had not in my formal studies become a student of Marxism, it was in the background of all my studies. And when I got to the Indiana University system, I found the all-university catalogue, which is not the same as the Indianapolis campus catalogue, and noticed that they had a listing for a course on Marxist theory. So I thought, hey, I’m going to teach this. It’s in the all-university catalogue; I don’t have to make a special application, I’ll just offer it. And that was the one course I offered every year, from that point on, for as long as I was there. So that gave me a constant refresher, every year, with the basics. And I adapted them to the situation that was going on at the time. Then in 1985, I first wrote for the *Monthly Review*; I got quite close to their editorial people and did quite a lot of writing for them through the 1990s, though it’s been sporadic since then.

Cohen: Did you feel, though, that without the Soviet Union, the task of building socialism was more difficult? In spite of the horrors of the Soviet Union, many people I’ve interviewed have said it was a very disorienting moment, to say the least, and have really expressed a sense of loss, that this took something very profound away from the ability to envision a socialist world, even against the actually existing one. How do you feel in that regard?

Wallis: Oh, yes. I certainly agree with that, absolutely. In terms of support for movements elsewhere in the world, the presence of the Soviet Union was important, and imperialism has been much more unrestrained since it disappeared. So, it certainly was a setback, but to argue from that that socialism had therefore been permanently consigned to the dustbin of history didn’t make any sense.

Cohen: What do you think about the practice of reading Marx and Marxian theory in universities and schools as opposed to the Brecht Forum? One of the things about NAM that strikes me, hearing and reading about it, is this very conscious sense on the part of its members that the theory had an application for forming a movement, and this was represented in the ecumenical approach NAM took to its reading, thinking, and application. In its *Discussion Bulletin*, writers would link current developments in labor, or the women's movement, to Gramsci, or Gorz, or Ehrenreich, and would then go on to develop community organizing projects around health care, or public ownership of the utilities. How do you see the practice of teaching Marxism in the university system, versus reading and teaching Marxism in NAM?

Wallis: Well, I think both are useful. I wouldn't put them in opposition to one another. To me, the great personal example of teaching Marx in the universities is Bertell Ollman. He's done an enormous service not only by his presentations and his books, but also by the humor that he injects into the process. He edited a book on socialist pedagogy, a wonderful book, which came out more than twenty years ago—*Studies in Socialist Pedagogy*. The point of the collection is that the pedagogy can be carried out whether you're in academia or outside of it. The university is just one platform. Of course, there's a danger if you're just in the university of becoming co-opted, of engaging in a purely theoretical venture, so I think it's important for there to be a movement outside for one to be involved in. You need to be enriched and learn as well as teach. And you need to learn what people can do, and think, in particular situations, in ways we can't imagine just from reading the theory. I certainly see the need for the interrelationship of theory and practice.

Cohen: In your experience, is it in the university that this kind of thinking can happen most readily now?

Wallis: That's a difficult question. There's more space for it there than in any other institution of the status quo, which isn't saying all that much. I think there needs to be a vibrant exchange within the Marxist orbit outside the university as well. It's not enough if it's in the university. But it's difficult in the labor movement, for example, especially in the U.S., where the unions were legally purged of leftists. It doesn't mean they're totally absent, but it does mean there are obstacles to their work, and the efforts to overcome them are important.

My main source of optimism at the present time, however, comes from the developments in Bolivia and Venezuela. I made my first trip back to South America just a year ago. I hadn't been there since I was in Peru. I'd been to Cuba and Nicaragua in the meantime, but not South America. I think there's an epochal significance to the Venezuelan development because it goes one step beyond all the previous ones in many ways. As in the Chilean case, power transfer has come about through the legal process, but unlike the Chilean one, they neutralized the army. And now there's the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia, which represents the terrific mobilization of the Indian communities in that country. Of course, it's vulnerable with the rich province that may split off, but at least what you're seeing now is what we thought might not ever happen again when Al-

lende was overthrown. The idea that you could actually have a movement come into office through the constitutional process that had a genuine commitment to transform the society . . . this hadn't happened in any of the European cases because all the European social democracies had been co-opted. It's an unfinished process, but there's a tremendous mobilization of the people there and an intensity to the conflict that has already had a major impact and can inspire people in other countries as well.

Cohen: Can we go back to that point earlier about how NAM was bolstered by what was happening around the world? Do you see what's happening down South, for lack of a better word, encouraging movements and people elsewhere?

Wallis: That's another tough question. I think there's a basis for taking some hope from those events. It's not that any change is going to be easy. In the first place, the whole political agenda that provoked this reaction in the South, the so-called "neo-liberal agenda," had a very repressive effect, especially within the United States. So in some ways, the situation is more difficult.

I'm actually very pessimistic with the U.S. scene now. I just don't know which way to turn. I just read an article by Adolph Reed in the latest issue of *The Progressive* on why he's going to sit out this [2008] election; it captures a mood. There's an intensification of crisis, and I think there's an enormous task of education that is required, but there's going to be great receptivity to it because things are going to get so much worse. I mean, you see this drama now of all the areas that are immediately affected by environmental catastrophes. And then people who were affected also by some of the illnesses associated with the environmental degradation, and so on. With all this, the potential for, let's say, critical reaction—the objective basis for it—is certainly spreading, and we, meaning the organized Left with some kind of message to interpret all of this, haven't been able to keep up with it.

I think there was more of a sense that things were in motion around us in the early eighties than there is now. Still, there are some encouraging signs. The main new and positive thing is the whole movement symbolized by Seattle in 1999, and then the demonstrations that have continually followed these international gatherings ever since, whether it's the G8, or now the G20, or the World Trade Organization. And this is an international movement. The other thing that's very important now and that didn't exist then is the World Social Forum, and the various regional Social Forums. There is something new.

These developments, I think, do go beyond what there was before, in an important respect, which is that, unlike the antiwar movement or the civil rights movement, they are talking about the system as a whole. Although groups like NAM had been doing this, they never reached any great size. By contrast, the Social Forums, although they're not a coherent organization, they do bring together masses of people, so in terms of just showing that there's a constituency favoring radical change, it's quite impressive.

And then there's the U.S. Social Forum, which took place in Atlanta in June. I wasn't there, but from what I've read about it, it was remarkable in

the sense of, on the one hand, reflecting a critical view of the system as a whole, and on the other, attracting an enormous number of grassroots organizations, a lot of people of color, and really breaking through the barrier that one often hears about, as to the difficulty of forming multiracial movements. Well, this was a multiracial process from the beginning, which is the way things have to go.