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Johanna Fernandez
Baruch College

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The Young Lords and the Social and Structural Roots of Late Sixties Urban Radicalism

Cover Page Footnote

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THE YOUNG LORDS

AND THE SOCIAL AND STRUCTURAL ROOTS OF LATE SIXTIES URBAN RADICALISM

Johanna Fernandez, Ph.D.
Baruch College

In the second half of the 1960s, the politics and models of protest engendered by the Black Power Movement captured the imagination of a generation and awakened a multitude of radical movements among diverse groups with a history of racial oppression in the United States. Organizations such as the Young Lords Organization, which fashioned itself after the Black Panther Party launched important local organizing efforts that won important reforms for poor Latino and African American urban communities around issues of housing and urban renewal in Chicago and childhood lead poisoning, sanitation, and the crisis in public hospitals in New York. This article explores the character and influence of protest movements in the late 60s through a review of the emergence of Young Lords Organization in Chicago and New York, a Puerto Rican revolutionary nationalist organization that consciously fashioned itself after the Black Panther Party (BPP)¹ and ardently championed the independence of Puerto Rico, America's last standing neo-colony.² As products of the postwar racial and political economy of northern cities, YLO members launched one of the first Latino formations that identified with the Black Power movement and that saw itself as part of the African Diaspora. The history of militant urban activism in the late 1960s suggests that organizations like the Young Lords and the Black Panthers were spawned by the deep and unprecedented social and economic changes taking place in northern cities in the postwar period and that their practices and politics were also tied to these developments. The history of the Young Lords Organization challenges mainstream depictions of the civil rights and black power movements. It suggests that although racial inequality in America impelled the movement's emergence, the objectives and character of protest, were integrally woven with grievances of social and economic import and driven by a strong class impulse.²

The YLO was a radical political group that first emerged in Chicago in the late 1960s. It was heavily influenced by the politics and protest style of the Black Panther Party and led by 1st and 2nd generation, Puerto Rican radicals raised in the Mainland US, rather than on the island as well as other Latinos. The members of the organization were youth who were radicalized by the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and whose political outlook was shaped by the social and economic crises that began

to grip northern cities in the postwar period.

One of the most striking aspects of the history of the YLO is its genesis. Before its emergence as a political organization, the Young Lords was a gang that had been active in Chicago since the 1950s and that emerged politicized in that city in the tumult of 1968. Imprinted in the Young Lords' evolution from gang to political organization is a powerful story of agency and rebirth. This extraordinary and deliberate political transformation on the part of poor urban youth challenges the dominant historical narrative of radical movements of the sixties, which featured white students, urban rioters, and a narrowly conceived New Left as its major protagonists.³

The phenomenon of the proliferation of gangs in postwar Chicago is complex and obfuscated by contemporary media-driven and racialized understandings of this form of social organization. In 1950s Chicago, gangs were a way of life in poor and working class neighborhoods, black, white, and the hues in between. Through these forms of social organization, young people of all races sought to cobble together an identity and a sense of belonging. They provided a structure for benign social activities, such as parties, fundraisers for the acquisition of stylish jackets, which became associated with a particular gang formation, as well as for more marginal activities, such as petty crime.⁴ In times of economic uncertainty, when ethnic and racial tensions grew, local gangs engaged in defensive competition for turf control along racial and ethnic lines. But in the racially shifting neighborhoods of postwar Chicago, racial turf wars were fed, generally, by the influx of black, Puerto Rican, and Mexican migrants to the city at a moment when the economic structure of the city was changing. But locally and on the ground, urban renewal policies exacerbated inter-gang violence and rivalry as working class families were displaced from their homes to make room for middle-class housing and business-led economic development.⁵

The Chicago Young Lords recount stories of multiple displacements from their neighborhoods, a process which usually culminated with their relocation to the unwelcoming neighborhoods populated by Irish, Italian and German immigrants and their descendents. Former Young Lords describe the brutal racial harassment they suffered. One former member, Rory Garcia, remembers waking up one day and refusing to go school, because he "simply did not want to fight anymore." He

left school in 9th grade and never went back.⁶ Former members describe how their gang networks and activities taught them how to fight at a young age - and prepared them to navigate the mean streets of Chicago.

This brief history offers a dramatic example of how a complex web of conscious interventions and unplanned circumstances contributed to the radicalization and transformation of this gang. The primary architect of the Young Lords' political conversion was its chairman, Jose "Cha Cha" Jimenez. Like many black and Latino urban youth of his time, the Puerto Rican gang-leader-turned-activist was radicalized in prison. Ironically, incarceration during this moment of social upheaval, opened up possibilities for some. In prison, Jimenez read the story of religious transformation told by Thomas Merton in his bestseller *Seven Storey Mountain*. He also read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. These books were made available to him by a prison inmate and librarian who was a member of the Nation of Islam. Conversations about these books with fellow inmates in the atmosphere of possibility created by the social movements of the era awakened Jimenez to the world of political ideas. The Nation of Islam's religious intervention in the prisons and its contribution to the transformation of Malcolm X is perhaps the pivotal centerpiece of the otherwise untold history of the evolution and character of northern struggles. Upon release from prison, Jimenez was targeted by a war on poverty program designed to bridge inmates' transition from jail to civilian life and help them find employment. He was also approached by a local activist Pat Divine, who convinced Jimenez that he should join the struggle against urban renewal in the Lincoln Park section of Chicago where the Lords were active.

In short, the actions of the NOI in prison, an anti-poverty program, the conscious intervention of a seasoned, local activist, and the atmosphere of possibility created by the social movements of the era all contributed to Jimenez' political transformation and drove him to take on the Herculean task of redirecting the activities of his gang. Jimenez also cites the dramatic example of the Black Panther Party, which established a compelling model to follow. But challenges for Jimenez abounded. He suggests that the learned behavior of survival adopted by gang members was perhaps his greatest stumbling block. In many ways, gang members were conditioned to thinking narrowly and in a sectarian fashion about turf control and protecting their own and consequently they were not easily politically mobilized.

The transformation from gang to political organization did not come easily. Jimenez explains the alienating experience of living through two opposing realities: being a respected leader of his community one day and then awaking to the painful process of being an outcast, a suspected "communist" the next. Until one night in 1968, that is, when a group of five Young Lords witnessed the fatal shooting of one of the gang, Manuel Ramos, by an undercover police officer, James Lamb. That night, the Young Lords who were present during the altercation were arrested. Jimenez, who was not at the party, was the person the Lords called from prison. That was the turning point. The five Young Lords spent weeks in prison. They were never charged with a crime, and the police officer who fatally shot their friend was never brought up for charges. In the weeks that followed, the Young Lords would be politically transformed by the campaign they would mount to bring officer James Lamb to justice.

In the weeks and months that followed and in consultation with Panther leaders Fred Hampton, Bobby Lee, and Henry "Poison" Gaddis, Jimenez proceeded to turn the Young Lords into

the Panther's Puerto Rican counterpart.⁷ Because of their established gang network, hundreds of young men and women joined the Young Lords Organization and partook in their militant neighborhood protests against urban displacement under the guise of urban renewal.

The example set by the Black Panther Party provided a compelling model of protest that was instrumental to the evolution of the Young Lords. Following the first wave of urban upheavals beginning in Harlem in 1964, the BPP's founding members resolved to organize the radicalized sections of poor and working class African Americans. To this end, the BPP initiated a series of "survival programs," aimed to address the systemic causes of the riots. The first of these was a civilian patrol unit to monitor police arrests and defend community residents against police aggression in East Oakland, California. Later, the Panthers added a children's breakfast program, an ambulance service, and a lead poisoning detection program to their compendium of activities.⁸

Between 1968 and 1970, the Chicago YLO led a series of militant campaigns with a community service aspect akin to the Black Panther Party's survival programs. In Chicago, a city targeted by the Johnson administration's war on poverty initiative, the YLO established tactical alliances with social service organizations, community advocates and government antipoverty programs. The Young Lords' protest actions included the occupation of the Armitage Street Church in Chicago following several failed attempts at convincing church leadership to allow the group use of the space to set up a day care program and a health clinic. Collaborating with other radical organizations and social service groups, the Chicago YLO successfully stopped an urban renewal plan for construction of middle-income homes in the city's West Lincoln Park neighborhood, which would have displaced Puerto Ricans and other Latinos.⁹

The Puerto Rican radicals inspired the formation of sister organizations in other cities, the most influential of which was based in New York City. The New York Young Lords subsequently duplicated the organizing efforts of the Chicago group in Puerto Rican neighborhoods including, East Harlem and the South Bronx. In New York, where college education became widely accessible to racial minorities in the 1960s through pioneering programs at the City University of New York, the Young Lords Organization-later renamed the Young Lords Party (YLP)-was initiated by politicized students in 1969. It flourished alongside the conflagrations of New York's city and labor politics in the late 1960s. These young men and women - full of passion- came of age during the racially divisive NYC teacher's strike of 1968, the school decentralization movements in Ocean-Brownsville, recurrent housing struggles, the welfare rights movement, the prison rebellions at the Tombs and Attica, local street riots, and the rise of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos as an electoral force in the city.

Before long the New Young Lords became known for organizing militant, media savvy community-based protest campaigns against inadequate health care, dilapidated housing, hunger, lead poisoning and tuberculosis among poor children and city residents, irregular sanitation services. Eventually the NY group severed its ties to Chicago and renamed itself the Young Lords Party. The YLP established branches in the Bronx, East Harlem, Brooklyn, the Lower East Side, Hartford, Bridgeport, Newark, Camden, and Philadelphia.

Like the Black Panthers, the Young Lords were self-proclaimed revolutionary nationalists who argued for Puerto Rican Independence, and fought against poverty and Puerto Rican

oppression in the US. They were nationalists because they believed that in order to fight oppression, Puerto Ricans needed to form their own separate organizations. They argued that building a separate Puerto Rican organization was crucial because it would build confidence amongst Puerto Ricans and in the process combat the negative psychological wages of racism. One of the major contradictions of their nationalist orientation was that approximately 30% of the organization's membership both in Chicago and in New York was composed of African American and non-Puerto Rican Latinos.¹⁰

These self proclaimed revolutionary nationalists and anti-capitalists were influenced by variants of Marxism, Maoism, theories of revolution that emerged out of national independence struggles espoused by Franz Fanon, Ernesto Che Guevara, and Régis Debray as well as the ideas of the father of Puerto Rican nationalism: Don Pedro Albizu Campos.

Because Puerto Ricans were relatively new arrivals in New York and Chicago, the emergence of an organization as radical as the Young Lords became the subject of hundreds of articles in local news publications including the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune. As recent arrivals, Puerto Ricans were not expected to assert themselves in such dramatic a fashion. In fact according to one New York Times article, Puerto Ricans were viewed as a "mild mannered" people. So what led to the adoption of radical politics by this section of Puerto Ricans? The riots were the single development that most influenced the emergence of northern urban radicalism in the 1960s. In 1966 over 24 cities went up in flames. That same year Puerto Ricans rioted in Chicago. And the day before the Detroit riots of 1967, Puerto Ricans rioted in East Harlem. Detonated in each case by the police shootings of Puerto Rican civilians, these riots marked a turning point for Puerto Ricans in the U.S. mainland. Moreover, rioting by an ethnic group, which had been previously referred to as a "mild-manner people," revealed the extent of civil rights injuries for minority groups other than Afro-Americans. These events opened the possibility for reformulating a public debate on inequality that the mainstream media had largely cast in black and white.

The urban riots were a bold reminder of the class divisions in American society. These rebellions were a raw manifestation of the anger and political disenchantment possessed by racial minorities in the postwar North. They dramatized the conditions of racial apartheid, unemployment, inferior education, housing, and medical care in Northern cities.

The riots expressed the sentiment that racial and economic inequality in the North was a structural feature of American society requiring fundamental change, and that nothing short of a full-scale rebellion would bring about an equitable social order. In many ways this logic was right. While in the South white supremacists were at the helm of a renegade and anachronistic system of racial segregation that was marginal to the American political and economic structure and therefore could be defeated, in the north, problems were more structural and entrenched in the very fabric of the system, and therefore required changes of revolutionary proportion. After WWII northern cities became more segregated by race and more divided by class than ever before in the history of the cities.¹¹

First WWII encouraged a mass migration of people of color into the cities because during

the war the economy was cranked up at maximum capacity for the war effort. AA from South, Puerto Ricans from PR, Mexicans from Mexico, and Chicanos and Native Americans from the southwest traveled to northern cities in search of wartime jobs. The process of suburbanization, which happened simultaneously, encouraged the departure of whites from the cities. In many ways, the urbanization and proletarianization of otherwise rural people gave them confidence, improved their wages and gave them a sense of their power in numbers. This migration to the cities led to the rise of the civil rights movement.¹²

In the case of Puerto Ricans, the transfer of more than one third of Puerto Rico's population to New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia between 1943 and 1960 engendered a unique generation of mainland-identified Puerto Rican youth. As sons and daughters of the postwar migration, their consciousness was shaped by an unlikely combination of politicizing experiences from the rise of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War to their own experience in an urban setting beset by industrial decline and greater economic and racial segregation. The convergence of Puerto Rican migration with the rise of the civil rights movement, in particular, had a profound impact on the racial consciousness of the children of Puerto Rican migrants. Among other developments, this process gave birth to an organization with the kind of politics held by the Young Lords Organization, which would insist that Puerto Ricans and African Americans shared common political and economic interests.

However with the end of World War II came a long-term process of structural changes in the economy of northern cities. A process of de-industrialization took hold which created a sizable class of *permanently* unemployed and discouraged, young workers - a completely new development in modern urban history. The consequences for the newcomers was devastating. The industrial base of the cities, which up until then had provided stable and consistent employment to new migrants was now evaporating. And because African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Native Americans began to migrate into the cities in large numbers as a result of the war-time labor demands of WWII. People of color were disproportionately affected by these new changes. The situation was such that the Bureau of Labor Statistics began to publish a series of reports in the 1960s on the changes underfoot in the labor force of New York City. These reports articulated a concern over groups of predominantly Black and Puerto Rican men in their prime working years who were living in New York's poorest slums. Compared with black and white men, lack of job activity was lowest among Puerto Ricans. In 1966, 47 percent of Puerto Ricans in New York were either unemployed, underemployed, or permanently out of the labor force for lack of success in finding employment.¹³ In Chicago 22% of industry left to the suburbs between 1950 - 1977.¹⁴ And city conditions were further worsened by tax-base erosion, which further worsened the disrepair of the urban environment after the depression.

These conditions, combined with police brutality and northern racism on the one hand, and on the other the raised expectations about change produced by the southern civil rights movement - alongside very little real progress led - to the riots. The riots were a call to action for radicals. They suggested to many that if organized, the anger of the riots could lead to social change.

These conditions also influenced the character of



organizations like the Young Lords. It is no surprise, that in the context of a postwar urban economy, which for the first time in modern urban history, created a class of permanently unemployed urban dwellers that radical organizations like the Young Lords and the Black Panthers would launch a critique of this development -- at the same time that they would decide to organize what they called the "young lumpenproletarian cats:" here referring to a term coined by Karl Marx to describe the permanently unemployed and discouraged workers living on the margins of society. So part of what is see happening is that radical grassroots movements that were cohering in the second half of the decade reflected the distinctive social features of the urban environment in which they emerged. The urban movements built by the YL and BPP and others emerged out of

the YLO challenged quite sharply the bankruptcy of these theories.

In fact, contrary to the static narrative of the postwar urban crisis as a force that prostrated communities of color, the local histories of the Young Lords and the Black Panthers suggest that they were among the first to identify the causes of and launch a fight back against what we know today as the urban crisis.

At the same time, the increased racism in mainstream political debates about the origins of the urban crisis coupled with the increased racial segregation in the cities -- that people of color were moving in and whites were moving out -- made an interracial struggle with white Americans very difficult to imagine. So what we see happening is that the material basis for black and white solidarity was evaporating. Instead dramatic



and were a response to the new technical and educational structures of capitalism and its "modernization" in the second half of the 20th century. Thus, these young militants were reacting to special conditions at the same time that they were trying to make sense of them.¹⁵

In the cities the burden of poverty, of the kind that was being produced in the postwar period, was disproportionately borne by people of color, especially the young men amongst them. Yet, in public discourse in the 1960s urban poverty was increasingly seen as a racial phenomenon rather than as a product of the postwar, structural transformation of the cities. And increasingly, racist theories about the dysfunctionality of the black family and the propensity for violence among black and Latino males came to explain the causes of the new urban crisis. In their papers and in their public meetings orgs like the BPP and

action was created by polyglot groups birthed of the increasingly multi-ethnic character of the American ghetto. Moreover, the era's nationalist political orientation was shaped by the demographic changes taking place in the cities. This situation determined, in part, the strong racial nationalism of urban, radical politics in the 1960s as practiced by people of color. The organizations coalesced on the basis of race and ethnicity reflecting the residual racial configuration and ideology of the old racial structures in America, but on the ground in its racial makeup and composition, they were a harbinger of things to come: the group reflected the diverse racial and ethnic makeup of the postmodern city, of which Los Angeles is the best example.

Despite its largely Puerto Rican membership and professed Puerto Rican nationalism, the organization possessed a rare multi-racial and multi-ethnic composition that presaged the

contemporary demographic character of American cities. Operating in the interstices of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the YLO and the YLP attracted Chicanos, African Americans, and other Latinos. According to Iris Morales, former member of the YLP and producer of the documentary film on the Young Lords, *¡Palante, Siempre, Palante!*, “activists who had participated in the civil rights, Black liberation, and cultural nationalists movements joined.” Puerto Ricans were a majority of the members, but African Americans “made up about 25 percent of the membership. Other Latinos -Cubans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Panamanians, and Columbians -also joined. One member was Japanese-Hawaiian.”¹⁶ Most importantly, non-Puerto Rican members were not merely passive participants in the organization, but were integral to its life-blood. As mentioned previously Oliver, was the first woman elected to the Young Lords’ central committee. Pablo Yoruba Guzman, one of the founders of the New York group and member of the central committee was of Afro-Cuban parentage, and Omar Lopez, the major strategist of the Chicago YLO was Mexican American. With a formal leadership in New York largely composed of Afro-Latinos, and with fully one-quarter of its membership comprised of African Americans, YLP members launched one of the first Latino formations that identified with the Black Power movement, that saw itself as part of the African Diaspora, and that was instrumental in theorizing and identifying the structures of racism embedded in the culture, language, and history of Latin America and its institutions. Along with several of her peers in the YLP like Iris Morales, Oliver was among the first individuals in the United States to initiate the work of analyzing racial identity and racial formation in Latin America and the specific historical circumstances and comparatively different economic and political contours within which racism emerged in that continent.

But one thing we can learn from history is that conditions alone do not a radical movement make. The conditions outlined above, combined with northern racism and police brutality on the one hand and on the other the example set by organizations such as the Black Panther Party were instrumental in fueling a radical movement. The riots functioned as a call to action for radical activists. After the riots, radicals understood that militant action alongside a radical analysis of the problems of American society could influence a wide periphery of working people. The emergence of the Black Panther Party in 1966 was the most dramatic example of this development.

The Black Panther Party was compelling because it articulated in simple and uncompromising language the totality of political and economic grievances with which black northerners had been concerned since the start of the civil rights movement during WWII. Their platform read as follows: “We Want the power to determine the destiny of our Black Community; ‘...full employment for our people,’ ‘...an end to the robbery by the white man of our black community,’ ‘decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings,’ ‘education,’ ‘an immediate end to police brutality,’ ‘...clothing, justice, and peace.’”¹⁷ And the BPP’s “survival programs” and their dramatic civilian patrol unit was a brilliant application of their politics because these addressed the causes of the riots in both economic and political terms. What was different about the BPP was that it combined concrete community-based organizing with an overarching critique of capitalism and a critique of the role of the state, a combination, which had not previously been articulated decisively by any civil rights organization. Their critique of the state was critical because it tapped into an overarching trend

within the movement wherein the state was a key focal point and target of protest. Sixties activist critiqued and protested against government repression; against poor municipal services; against urban renewal; against the warfare state; against the state’s control of women’s bodies; against legal and state sponsored forms of racial and ethnic oppression; and against the forms of punishment instituted by the state (the prisoner take-over of the Attica prison comes to mind). This was also the moment of a rights consciousness movement, in which the state was challenged on its violations of the rights of individuals.

The BPP also proposed an alternative view of how society might be organized upon more humane priorities. They called themselves socialists. The Black Panthers then, did three important things: 1) it engaged in a kind of organizing that connected with the anger and conditions of African-Americans and other minorities in urban centers; 2) it articulated an analysis and theory that explained the black crisis; and 3) it put forth an alternative vision of society. Because the BPP accomplished these three things, the organization gave northern protests a deeper purpose and meaning at precisely the time when radicalization was becoming widespread.

In essence, the BPP established a model of organizing that captured the imagination of urban dwellers and that awakened many other radical movements, especially among groups with a history of racial oppression in this country. Today, however, the Black Panther Party is maligned and not accorded its proper place in history and we know very little about the movements that it inspired. These include the

1. Revolutionary Union Movement (RUM)
2. Brown Berets
3. Health Revolutionary Unity Movement (HRUM)
4. I WOR KUEN
5. Young Patriots
6. American Indian Movement (AIM)
7. Young Lords and many others

In the late 1960s the Young Lords captured the political imagination of a growing number of Puerto Ricans and other racial minorities in Chicago and New York and dramatized the problems of poor people of color. Beginning in 1969, the Young Lords in New York engaged in a fast-paced course of dramatic and media savvy activism and campaigns, which they called offensive in deference to the Tet campaign of the Vietnamese: a tell-tale sign of the group’s dynamism and ability to link international crises with local concerns.¹⁸

The first was the Garbage Offensive, a campaign protesting irregular sanitation services in East Harlem and the absence of garbage cans in that neighborhood. It called attention to the crisis by sweeping the streets and clearing empty lots and erecting traffic barriers at major intersections with garbage they collected. Thus, they stopped traffic for blocks on end, attracted the attention of thousands of local residents, created a public town-hall meeting effect and in the process captured the attention of local officials. Their demonstrations were covered heavily by the media in the summer of 1969 and contributed to making sanitation a major issue in the run-up to the mayoral election of November 1969. The group successfully exposed the city for not deeming Puerto Ricans and African Americans worthy of city services.¹⁹

A quieter and lesser know campaign was their Lead Offensive. In the fall of 1969, the Young Lords launched a campaign to combat lead poisoning among children. In collaboration with

medical residents, nurses and hospital staff at Metropolitan hospital in East Harlem they launched a door-to-door testing drive and used Press conferences to publish their results: that 30% of the children they tested were lead-positive. The Young Lords had launched their initiative after the nearly fatal case of Gregory Franklin, a AA boy who lived in a building with over 100 housing violations. The militants called sit-ins at the department of health, leafleted in East Harlem, and used the media to expose government inaction. In 1974 the Journal of Public Health credited the Young Lords and their activism with the passage of anti-lead poisoning legislation in the city. This was the first campaign in what became the Young Lords' crusade for medical rights for poor African American, Latino, and Asian city dwellers.²⁰

In December 1969, the Young Lords "took over" the First Spanish Methodist Church in East Harlem and turned it into a social service sanctuary for the poor. They used everything at their disposal to illustrate their cause. At a press conference a YL explained: "People who claim to be Christian have forgotten the it was Jesus who walked among the poor, the most oppressed, the prostitutes, and drug addicts of his time. That it was Jesus who said that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."²¹



Then in the summer of 1970, they did the unthinkable and occupied Lincoln Hospital with the blessing of a radical flank of doctors. The Young Lords' efforts advanced swiftly from discreet one-on-one conversations with patients and employees concerning hospital conditions to a dramatic twelve-hour occupation of one of the hospital's buildings, the Nurses Residence, a building that formed part of the Lincoln complex, which in an earlier era housed the first nursing school for black women in the United States and was a stop in the underground railroad. The Young Lords were also continuing the work of the BPP and various other activists who in the winter of 1969 spearheaded a battle over control of the Community Mental Health Clinic affiliated with Lincoln. The Young Lords' occupation dramatized Lincoln's deplorable conditions; as a result the crisis at Lincoln Hospital became a major item in the city's political debates. The whirlwind of controversy was recorded in over one hundred mainstream and alternative news articles. As a result, government officials were forced to find ways to improve care in the public hospitals. The Young Lords were among the first activists to challenge the advent of draconian reductions in social spending in public hospital and privatization policies in the public sector. Their actions eventually led to the creation of one of the principle acupuncture drug treatment centers in the western world at Lincoln.²²

At their best, the Young Lords demonstrated a willingness and keen ability to read the pulse of local communities, identify issues significant to them, and adapt their work and campaigns accordingly. They were also especially successful at building

coalitions with health professionals. Their ability to link local concerns with international causes was effective and tapped into the broader concerns of the period. They named their campaigns after the dramatic Vietnamese military campaign against US forces in 1968, known as the Tet Offensive. Their creative tactics and brilliant use of the media was also critical to their success and popularity.

They were also courageous in taking the best of ideas of the Black Power and Women's Movements to expose and challenge the wages of gender inequality, homophobia, and color prejudice among Latinos. The group's commitment to the struggle against racism and their insistence that poor African Americans and Latinos shared common political and economic interests was core to their work. Although Puerto Ricans as a group did not

necessarily identify with African Americans, upon arrival to the U.S. mainland many Puerto Ricans encountered many of the same racial barriers as did black Southerners migrating to northern cities in the postwar years. The convergence of Puerto Rican migration with the rise of the Civil Rights Movements had a profound impact on the racial consciousness of the children of Puerto Rican migrants. For example numerous members of the Young Lords considered joining or were members of black protest groups

prior to the Young Lords' emergence. The group played a crucial role in identifying and challenging the unconscious racism embedded in Latino culture, language, and values.

So what does all of this mean for the study of the Sixties? The history of the Young Lords suggests that even though the story of the Sixties is told in black and white, by the mid 1960s, the movements and its members reflected the multi-racial and multi-ethnic character of American cities. Most importantly, the history of the Young Lords challenges mainstream assumptions about the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. When we think of the Civil Rights and Black Power or about the black or brown radicals of this period we immediately think about the struggle for racial equality. However, the group's campaigns demonstrate that while 60s movements were impelled by issues of race, the objectives and the character of protest were integrally tied to issues of social and economic import; they were driven by a strong class impulse.

Increasingly, movement activists were concerned with finding solutions to problems as pedestrian as garbage collection, the removal of lead paint from tenement walls, addressing the crisis of health care and its delivery, social welfare programs, and fighting urban renewal, among other issues. Essentially, movement activist in were concerned with issues pertaining to a social democratic polity.

CONCLUSION

By the 1960s, postwar deindustrialization, white flight, and residential tax-base erosion in the cities had produced unprecedented levels of racial segregation, permanent unemployment, and all the attendant problems of urban decay: poor education, health, and housing, a disfigured physical landscape, and explosive tensions between the community and the police. It was against this backdrop that the Northern movement emerged. The temperament of Young Lord militant activism and the group's insurgent politics were rooted in a deep social disenchantment at worsening objective conditions, a disenchantment that only deepened when the hopes raised by the civil rights movement did not materialize in the North.

In his widely read and controversial 1964 assessment and prospective of the Southern civil rights movement, Bayard Rustin attempted, among other things, to define the character of its Northern counterpart, suggesting that in Northern ghettos the civil rights movement was "perhaps misnamed." Rustin, the skillful strategist of the civil rights movement and foremost political commentator of his time proclaimed that, in the North, "at issue, after all, is not civil rights, strictly speaking, but social and economic conditions. Last Summer's riots were not race riots; they were outbursts of class aggression in a society where class and color definitions are converging disastrously."²³

As we have witnessed recently in New Orleans, the urban disrepair against which organizations like the Young Lords and Black Panther fought, and its racialized character, is still with us today. There is a lot that can be concluded about this age of great dreams during which ordinary people took the reigns of history in their own hands. One of the most important contributions of radicals was that they helped alter the terms of the political debate in America. Today, the dominance of conservative philosophies upholds that government is not bound to a social contract in which it is responsible for the well being of its citizens; that the invisible hand of the market rather than big government will take care of social problems, of all manor of crisis, and of wealth redistribution; that success is determined by individual virtue --and that poverty is the result of personal character flaw.

In the 1960s however, radicals won the argument that poverty was brought about by circumstances beyond the control of the poor and that these circumstances had long historical roots and that they were tied to the organization of society. They won the argument that racial oppression was a natural outgrowth of a society divided by class; that urban renewal in the form of gentrification and business-sponsored development would not solve the profound problems of urban de-industrialization and disrepair; and finally, among other things, they argued that imperialist war was not acceptable in a democratic society.

These are all arguments that merit consideration and urgent proliferation in American society today.

NOTES

¹ This review of the history and significance of the Young Lords builds on the arguments I put forth in my doctoral dissertation: Johanna Fernandez, "Radicals in the Late 1960s: A History of the Young Lords Party in New York" (Ph.D. Diss, Columbia University, 2005). My work builds upon the following pioneering works on the Young Lords: Frank Browning, "From Rumble to Revolution: The Young Lords," in *The Puerto Rican Experience*, ed. Eugene Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni (Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams, 1973), 231-245; Jennifer Lee, "The Young Lords, a New Generation of Puerto Ricans: An Oral History," *culturefront* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 64-70; Agustin Lao, "Resources of Hope: Imagining the Young

Lords and the Politics of Memory," *Centro* v7 n1 (1995): 34-49; Suzanne Oboler, "Establishing an Identity" in the Sixties: the Mexican-American/Chicano and Puerto Rican Movements," in Susan Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), Chapter 4; Carmen Teresa Whalen, "Bridging Homeland and Barrio Politics: the Young Lords in Philadelphia," in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, eds. Andres Torres and Jose E. Velazquez (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), Chapter 7. Retrospective accounts by former Young Lord activists have also contributed greatly to my work: Pablo Guzman, "Puerto Rican Barrio Politics in the United States," in *The Puerto Rican Struggle: Essays on Survival in the U.S.* eds., Clara Rodriguez, Virginia Sanchez Korrol, and Jose Oscar Alers (Maplewood: Waterfront Press, 1984), 121-128; Pablo Guzmán, "Ain't No Party Like the One We Got: The Young Lords Party and Palante" in *Voices from the Underground: Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era*, vol. 1, ed. Ken Wachsberger (Tempe: Mica Press, 1993), 293-304; and Pablo Guzmán, "La Vida Pura: A Lord of the Barrio," and Iris Morales "Palante, Siempre Palante! The Young Lords" in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, eds. Andres Torres and Jose E. Velazquez (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), Chapters 10 and 13; Mickey Miguel Melendez. *We Took The Streets: Fighting For Latino Rights and the Young Lords* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 2003).

² During most of the colonial period, Puerto Rico functioned primarily as a military outpost and had a diverse nonsegregated population consisting of a small number of slaves and Native Americans, a substantial number of freemen of color and poor white tenant farmers, and government officials. In Puerto Rico, rigid racial demarcations did not form part of the New World colony's social fabric in part because the slave plantation system was not a central feature of the island's economy. When a plantation economy did develop in the nineteenth century, severe labor shortages led to compulsory labor laws, which forced white land squatters to work alongside slaves and freemen of color in the fields. This development encouraged racial mixing and blurred racial differences as black slaves and white and colored laborers were compelled to intermingle with one another in the fields; an arrangement that eventually led each to find common cause with the other. See Sidney Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989): 82-94. For a discussion of racial ideology in the United States see Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in Kousser, J. Morgan and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982): 143-177 and Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the USA," *New Left Review* 181 (1990): 95-118.

³ Johanna Fernández, "Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics: The Young Lords, Late Sixties Radicalism, and Community Organizing in New York City," in Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, Editors *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside of the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan Global Academic Publishing of St. Martin's Press, 2003).

⁴ Works that exclude the diverse movements that emerged after 1968 include, Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Account of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Morrow, 1987); James Miller, "Democracy in the Street: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago" (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1987); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993); Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: New Books, 1987); Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, "The Failure and Success of the New Radicalism," in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* eds. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989); Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984); Winifred Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968: The Great Refusal* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989). Earlier

works which incorporate a narrative of the post-1968 period include, George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston: South End Press, 1987); Terry Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991)

- 5 For a discussion of Chicago gangs see: Andrew Diamond, "Hoodlums, Rebels, and Vice Lords: Street Gangs, Youth Subcultures, and Race in Chicago, 1919-1969," (Ph.D. diss: University of Michigan, 2004); Frederick Milton Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1, 313 Gangs in Chicago* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963).
- 6 Arnold Hirsch. *The Making of the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 7 Rory Garcia, Interview with author, October 25, 2005.
- 8 Henry "Poison" Gaddis, interview by author, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, January 2007.
- 9 Charles E. Jones, ed. *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (New York: Black Classic Press, 1998)
- 10 Frank Browning, "From Rumble to Revolution: The Young Lords," in *The Puerto Rican Experience*, ed. Eugene Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni (Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams, 1973), 232.
- 11 Iris Morales, "¡Palante, Siempre, Palante! The Young Lords" in Andres Torres and Jose E. Velazquez eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998): 214-215.
- 12 Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- 13 Jack Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement: The Changing Political Economy of Southern Racism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987): Chapters 2 & 3.
- 14 Although service industry jobs replaced blue-collar employment, the process of structural economic conversion failed to absorb large swaths of the urban population into the national economy. As early as the 1960s, the Department of Labor began to track the percentages of displaced workers using a new concept called "subemployment," a statistical index for tracking people who were either unemployed, underemployed, or permanently out of the labor force for lack of success in finding employment. United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Experience of the Puerto Rican Worker." *Middle Atlantic Region, Regional Reports*, no. 9 (June 1968): 21.
- 15 I am adapting, to the urban environment, an analysis of the general character of 60s protesters articulated in Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso, 2004): 43.
- 16 Iris Morales, "¡Palante, Siempre, Palante! The Young Lords" in Andres Torres and Jose E. Velazquez eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998): 214-215.
- 17 Phillip Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* (New York: Lippincott, 1970): 2-4.
- 18 "One Year of Struggle," *Palante* 2, no. 8, July 31, 1970: centerfold. Tamiment Library.
- 19 Murray Schumach, "Seas of Garbage Engulf Islands on Broadway," *New York Times*, September 3, 1969: 1; Joseph P. Fried, "East Harlem Youths Explain Garbage-Dumping Demonstrations," *New York Times*, August 19, 1969: 86; Carl Davidson, "Young Lords Organize New York," *Guardian*, 22, no. 3 (October 18, 1969): 6. For a reference to the series of demonstration held by the YLP, see also "Plastic Bags Given East Harlem in War on Garbage Pile Up," *New York Times*, September 13, 1969: 33.
- 20 Joseph Fried, "Paint-Poisoning Danger to Children Fought," *New York Times*, March 2, 1969: VI: 1, 8; "Lead Poisoning Is Affecting 112,000 Children Annually, Specialists Report," *New York Times*, March 26, 1969: 23; For more precise figures see Gary Eidsvold, Anthony Mustalish, and Lloyd F. Novick, "The New York City Department of Health: Lesson in Lead Poisoning Control Program," *American Journal of Public Health*, 64, no. 10 (October 1974): 959. The last document was replicated as a pamphlet by the New York City Department of Health, Vertical File, New York City, Poisoning, Lead (1970s Folder), Municipal Archives of the City of New York.
- 21 Juan Gonzalez in *El Pueblo Se Levanta* Videorecording (New York: Third World Newsreel, 1970) also quoted in *The Young Lords* recording by Elizabeth Perez Luna, Pacifica Radio Archives, 1977.
- 22 "Bronx Conflict Focused on Community Control," *Hospital Tribune* vol. 3, no. 9 (date not available), 1, 20, D. Samuel Gotteson Library, Yeshiva University, Albert Einstein College of Medicine Archives, Lincoln Hospital Papers and Vertical File, 1960-1975; Fitzhugh Mullan, *White Coat, Clenched Fist: The Political Education of an American Physician* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co, 1976); Cleo Silvers and Danny Argote, "Think Lincoln," *Palante* vol. 2 no. 6 (3 July 1970), 2, 16. Ellen Frankfort, "The Community's Role in Healing a Hospital," *Village Voice* (26 November 1970), 12, 14; "Lords Liberate Hospital," *Old Mole* vol. 1, no. 45 (August 7, 1970), 5; Alfonzo A. Narvaez, "Young Lords Seize Lincoln Hospital Building," *New York Times* (15 July 1970), 34.
- 23 Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary* vol. 39 no. 2 (February 1965): 26.

PHOTO DETAILS

p.23, 24, 26, 29, 31: The Department of Special Collections and Archives, *The Young Lords Collection*, DePaul University's John T. Richardson Library.

p.28: Exhibit piece by William Cordova, Three Walls Gallery, Chicago, Illinois.

JOHANNA FERNANDEZ currently teaches at Baruch College of the City University of New York (CUNY). Professor Fernandez has been the recipient of numerous awards and is currently a Scholar-in-Residence Fellow at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. She is also co-curator of a traveling exhibit of photographs, posters, and fliers that chronicle the common and connected histories of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords. The exhibit is entitled: *Radicals in Black and Brown: Palante! People's Power and Common Cause in the Black Panthers and Young Lords Organization*. She is currently working on her forthcoming book on the Young Lords Party, the Puerto Rican counterpart to the Black Panthers. The manuscript is under contract with Princeton in the 20th Century America series. The book is tentatively entitled, *When the World Was Their Stage: A History of the Young Lords, 1968-1974*.
To contact: johanna_fernandez@baruch.cuny.edu