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Reflections From a Lifetime of Activism.

An Interview with Chip Berlet

Interviewers: Kendell Sewell, Matthew Wentz, and Austin Zinkle, *University of Kentucky*

Chip Berlet is a widely published independent scholar who studies right-wing movements in the United States and Europe, as well as the global spread of conspiracy theories. He is an award-winning investigative journalist and photographer. Since the 1995 Oklahoma bombing, Berlet has appeared frequently in the media to discuss these issues. For over twenty years, Berlet was a senior analyst at Political Research Associates (PRA), a non-profit think tank in the United States that tracks right-wing networks. Berlet is co-author (with Matthew N. Lyons) of Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort (Guilford 2000) and more recently editor of Trumping Democracy: From Reagan to the Alt-Right (Routledge 2019).

Despite a lack of a college degree, Berlet has served on the advisory board of the Journal of Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions (now Politics, Religion & Ideology); and the advisory board for the Center of Millennial Studies at Boston University. He also served for over twenty years on the board of predecessor groups of what is now the Defending Dissent Foundation. He is active in the American Sociological Association in the sections on Collective Behavior and Social Movements and Marxism. Berlet's main website is at <http://www.researchforprogress.us/>.

Chip, could you talk a bit about how you found yourself interested in activism? How did you come to involve yourself with this type of work?

CB: I started out really wanting to be a sociologist and a journalist. It was my hope when I entered college at the University of Denver that I was going to be a journalist and use sociology to report on social movements. When I was in school, I took a position on the school newspaper, which pulled me out of classes probably more than my professors would have liked. While the balance between the appreciation of sociology and journalism was a conflict, I really enjoyed reading sociology and being in sociology courses. I was one of the people promoting student strikes with the school newspaper, the Denver Clarion. It was messy looking back. I ended up still hanging onto the sociology/mass media major, but I found myself getting more and more involved with the national radical student press, called College Press Services, based in Washington D.C. Some of us in Denver were interested in helping it from going under.

I tried to stay in sociology, but I also felt compelled to continue with my activist work. The final nail was when I took a class, the Black Experience in America, taught by Dean John Rice. This reframed my understanding of activism during this period, especially when [Rice] brought in guest speakers to speak on issues related to black civil rights. He was a veteran of the Korean War and came to speak about his indictment of American warfare. In the speech by Rice, there was a line that I will never forget—"What are you going to tell your children when they ask what you did to stop this immoral war?" This blew me away. My brother is fighting in Vietnam, and he knows what I am doing as a peace activist. But as student editor for the school newspaper, I felt like I had to do something more. Then, an instructor in the Speech Department turned in his Korean War medals, writing in a letter that he no longer valued them. So, I dropped out of school, but I stayed in touch with Dean Rice, especially since [Rice] loved my work with the student newspaper. So at least with some folks, I left on good terms. Dean Rice, I can say, had a significant impact on my life even though I did not continue at the University of Denver. Both Dean Rice and Chancellor Maurice Mitchell later wrote me letters urging me to return to finish my degree.

Can you go into detail on how you got involved in studying the far-right? When did you first encounter these groups during your reporting?

CB: [After I left the University of Denver] I entered the world of alternative journalism. I kept reading sociology, as well as some political science. I moved to Washington to be the Washington correspondent for College Press Service. I moved into a small apartment with three other people that were all Washington correspondents for some obscure and penniless news outlet or another.

So, I began to do some writing about far-right movements that were in the area. There was a Nazi group that had their headquarters in the area, and I decided to confront them. They were the sort that very much enjoyed putting on the uniforms and marching on members of the mixed-race community, getting them [beaten up], and then going back home to celebrate their manhood. I thought this was pretty pathetic, but I wanted to investigate further.

At the same time, there was a group called the National Caucus of Labor Committees that was bothering these far-right people. Counter Spy magazine sent a group of writers down to investigate for a story. They were interested in calling this group the new Brown shirts of the 1970s. They did not want to say that this group was openly fascist, but they were going around and beating up leftists. So Counter Spy wanted to find someone to look into this group, and they chose me. They were worried of being sued if they were not using the term "brown shirts" fairly. So, I said that I knew someone that could help answer this. I contacted Gabriella Simon-Edgecombe, a poet and Holocaust survivor, who worked as an academic activist. I knew she had a large knowledge of the Nazi movement during the early stages of Germany. So, I asked her if she could help me work on this story, and she said that I had to let her tutor me. She had books on the early Nazi movement, and she assigned things for me to read, including books in English and books in German written in Germany during that time. We did a significant amount of excavation into the history of the Nazi party to learn about the historical origins of these movements. I eventually went back to Counter Spy and said that I, as well as Gabriella Simon-Edgecombe, would be happy to call these people the brown shirts of the 70s. We felt that we

would be able to put together a pretty good defense, even if we could have been sued to oblivion [laughs]! It was after that event that I became known as an intellectual for the activist left.

How did you put this information to use? Can you talk a little about your early work investigating right-wing groups?

CB: I began working with people that did undercover work within right-wing groups. There were lawyers, private eyes, and other investigators. We were trying to unravel how the FBI was tracking some of these right-wing groups, as well as why the FBI thought it was worth their time, outside of the obvious overlap with the John Birch Society. Some of their files were appearing in the congressional record, so I began working on this to unravel the undercover operations within right-wing groups. Together with another group of people around the country, we were able to crack this right-wing spy network that was working with the FBI and working through the John Birch Society. There was an information flow that was going from the Birch Society to undercover right-wing agents, the Church League of America, and other evangelical groups. We discovered that there was this whole network and that these groups were connected to a spy network in San Francisco, so it just kept unraveling.

So, my wife and I decided to move to Chicago, Illinois. There we decided to buy a house in an integrating neighborhood. It was a predominantly white working-class neighborhood with a few black neighbors, but most had been chased out by those in the area. This was the neighborhood where Martin Luther King led an open housing march and had something [thrown by right-wing protestors] bounce off his head. This was a famous neighborhood that was determined to stay all-white, but we moved in, bought a house, and began working with an existing anti-racist, multiracial community organization. The goal of the Southwest Community Congress was to prevent attacks against black people moving into the neighborhood. I had stereotypes about how all of this worked from following social movements and right-wing movements, like how people in the community related to [neo-Nazis]. So, we began organizing, and for the first three years we were completely outorganized by Nazis in uniform, and it was embarrassing. We just were not getting any leverage, and it became frustrating. We knew there were people in the neighborhood that worked in integrated businesses and jobs, but they would come home and work during the weekend to keep black people out. Well it turns out that there was an economic aspect to this. These people owned all these bungalows on the southwest side of Chicago, and they put all of their investments into them. So, their entire retirement is based around selling their house for more than they paid for it, so they can then go fishing in the Ozarks (laughs). And everyone was telling them, 'If the blacks come into the neighborhood then the housing prices will go down, and you will not be able to retire after all of these decades of hard work.' This was not a narrative I heard from just ten, fifteen, or twenty people, but everyone who was white was familiar with this narrative. So, one of the things the blockbusters did was to sell the homes to families they knew would not be able to make the mortgage payments, thus the local bank was stuck with all of these mortgages. So, this was a scam that was designed to put money in the pockets of real estate developers. They would sell a house two to three times the

rate to a black family than they would a white family, watch that family fail, and then be happy knowing that the black family would have to go back to a black neighborhood.

Sociologically, this came as a major shock to me. I had no idea this dynamic was going on. But more importantly, these white people in the neighborhood also did not like the Nazis. As a multiethnic neighborhood, plenty of them were disgusted with the Nazis that came through in the area. Many of them came from nations in Europe that were run by Nazi collaborationist governments during WWII.

What was one of your earliest examples of organizing in Chicago?

CB: There was the Southwest Community Congress, which was organized by progressive social movement standards, and the Southwest Parish and Neighborhood Federation, organized by more left-center groups like the Alinskyists. The Alinskyists and the Southwest Parish and Neighborhood federation wanted to create an “ethnic village” with all of these four and five story apartments. But they specifically blocked off a road that would keep black people in the area from driving through to get to a good grocery store in the area. So, my wife and I ran into some young people that were trying to advertise the ethnic village to us. We confronted them and asked if black, Mexican, or middle eastern families were allowed in the ethnic village. And it became obvious to us that this “ethnic village” was only designed to be “ethnic” enough to include versions of white ethnicities, such as Latvian, Lithuanian, and German.

A friend of mine, Curt Koehler, decided that we should endorse the ethnic village. We thought we should endorse it with a press conference with a black woman who owned a sewing store, a Mexican butcher shop owner, and a Middle Eastern restaurant owner. Anyway, these are not white people in the eyes of our neighbors. And so, we staged this event, and the press comes, and some people from the Southwest Parish and Neighborhood Federation came, because they had to. And this woman gets up—this black African-American intellectual—and announces it is so important in America to have a respect for different ethnicities and to have them tell you their stories. And she introduced these three people, and each one is in on it, and they come up on stage and say things like, “I came here to get my family into a place where we can make a living,” and one of them—a black speaker—says “the only store I could find that really had what I needed was here, just a block from Western Avenue and the patrons have been wonderful.” And two weeks later there is no “ethnic village.” It is gone. It evaporates, there is no statement, it is gone. So that’s good organizing!

In your past, whether in your work as a journalist or as a scholar, were there experiences with subjects or interviewees that really stand out?

CB: A guy pulling a gun on me was very memorable. I thought it was a “manhood” test, which I did not want to fail... He was someone I had met because I was writing about the militia movement, and he was in the militia movement. He knew that I am writing about them, and it got back to me that in a bar somewhere he threatened to kill me.

Later, the leader of the New Hampshire militia movement and I are on a television program together, and in our conversation, I happen to say, “one of your guys threatened to kill me in a bar!” And he says, “Ah, he does that every week!” I go, “really?” He says, “yeah. I will set you up with a meeting. He’ll apologize.” And he set up the meeting and they gave me a militia hat.

I met another man who was the leader of the militia movement in New Hampshire a couple of times, and he introduced me to one of his militia members who had threatened me in public. The man apologized and said he threatened to kill people all the time when he was in taverns. I interviewed him a couple of times, and I wrote about him in the book *Right-Wing Populism in America*. And I talked about him critically, but, I thought, fairly. Journalism being what it is, I thought I now have an obligation to tell him that I am going to put this in print. Because he is going to be hurt. He knows who I am, but he will still be hurt. So, I make an appointment to go up and have lunch with him in [Dartmouth] New Hampshire. And at the lunch he is all nice, saying, “we’re going to have to agree to disagree. But I have some stuff back at the house I want to show you.” Well, stupid me. I have been trained by these private eye women who say, “never do that!” All these shows where people walk alone into a warehouse. “Never do that!” So, I go back to his house, we go upstairs, and he is sitting at his desk and I am on the other side of the desk. And we are talking, and he says, “I have thousands of pages of files on you as an agent of a Jewish group. You can’t fool me anymore.” And then he begins to rail at me, and he opens his desk drawer, and then he puts a handgun on the desk in between us. What do I do now? I thought, okay. First thing: do not reach for the gun. He will be faster. Second thing: do not provoke him. Talk slowly, calmly. I say, “I’m not really who you seem to think I am, but that’s a *great* gun.” So, I get him diverted by talking about the gun and how it is small but powerful and well-made, and he seems to forget that he wants to off me. I get up, and I walk out. He unfortunately never paid income tax and is now in prison for many years.

I always felt bad. If you really believe there is a conspiracy against America, what is your obligation as a citizen? These people think they are on to this conspiracy, and now President Trump tells them that it is real. It cannot get worse than that. And that is why I am so worried about what could happen.

In 2015, I interviewed Professor Paul Bookbinder, who studies the German Weimar period. I interview him, and I think he’s going to say there are some vague parallels between the United States now and Weimar Germany, but I get him on the phone and he says, “things are really bad here—there’s a crisis! I’m so glad you called!”

That ruined my whole week. I wanted him to be the guy who says, ‘well, there are some similarities....’ But no. He says that the United States in 2019 is so similar to the German Weimar period it’s scary. He says, “I’m glad you’re writing about it, and I hope we get through this.” That was not what I wanted to hear at all.

So that is what I have been doing. Running around, telling people that there is some really good social science that says things *are* much worse than the Democrats or the Republicans want to say. And what the Democrats are saying is *not* based on social science. It is just demonizing an other. I know Richard Hofstadter did some great social science work, but these people in right

wing movements—whom I have interviewed hundreds of—are not stupid, and they are not crazy. They are well-meaning people who believe a narrative. A narrative that they think requires them to act in certain ways. And, yes, it is white nationalism, and, yes, it is anti-Semitism. But that is not *all* it is. And this is what Arlie Hochschild wrote about in *Strangers in Their Own Land*—these are people who feel they’ve been disrespected on a massive scale, who thought they did everything they had to do for the America dream—they worked hard, raised kids, went to church, and thought they would go retire to go fishing in the Ozarks. But it is not going to happen. Their kids will not be able to go to college, they will be lucky if they can save their house, and some have already lost it. So, of course, they are pissed off. Who in American culture, history, or society can they blame?—black people, gay people, immigrants, Mexicans, Muslims. It is the other. The Democrats do not understand that they could reach these people if they would stop saying that they are stupid or crazy, and instead started talking about jobs. These are not disposable people. They can change their minds if they have a good organizer talking to them. There are alternatives to a collapse. But neither political party wants it.

It sounds like there is something hopeful in that theory you described just now, as opposed to the idea that people who buy into these extremist ideas are deluded or ignorant or whatever else. If people are ultimately rational, feeling human beings who have bought into a narrative, then there is hope for a successful counternarrative. Could you talk more about how we could work to reach across the aisle, so to speak, and talk with people in a way that would, hopefully, transform their views to something more positive?

CB: You can do it on a small level, in a community, a workplace, a church. There are small, defined places where a skilled person can go in and acknowledge their pain, which is real, but say that their solution currently is not going to work. But there is a way they can find a solution that will make them feel better about themselves [and their problems]. It could be religious or secular. There are all kinds of community leaders who can talk to people and say, “We can’t let this community be torn apart.” The biggest impediment to turning this around is the Democratic party, under their current leadership. They are surrounded by people who cite Hofstadter and treat these people like dirt. I used to go on MSNBC, but now I will not go on there anymore. They are part of the problem. Nor have they asked me since I started saying they are! The system is so broken that the democratic party is part of the problem and the liberal national media is, too.

I find allies in conservative evangelicals who say, “My flock is going down the tubes financially, and I cannot pull them away from this blame game. I need to find a way to talk to them.” I know religious people, union leaders, scholars, activists, all of whom have been able to reach into small settings and turn these problems around over time. But there is no magic fix. You have to be a part of a community to change it: if you’re going to work with a church, you have to join the church; if you’re going to work with a union, you have to be in the union; if you’re going to organize in an industry, you have to work in that industry. You have to have skin in the game. This is especially important in dealing with racism and antisemitism.

Another thing is to call people out, or to own your mistake if you are called out. Legendary Civil Rights activist Ruby Sales keeps me in line. For example, if I say on Facebook, “Trump is having a childish temper tantrum,” she will respond, “Chip, you know that’s just not true. He is a full-grown man who is using his power to crush us. So don’t you go calling him a child.” I will

think, “Wow, she’s right.” I always respond to these criticisms publicly. I’ll say, “I hadn’t thought about that. It was a bad use of terms. You are right. Sorry.” For me that is a teaching moment, to say to people, “No. You get called out for making a mistake. Own it.” That is how I continue to grow. People on my Facebook page, no matter what identity they have, will challenge me based on their knowledge of their own selves and say, “I don’t agree with that.”

Of course, we have a rule on my Facebook page that if you are impolite you get thrown off after three times that you degrade somebody on any level. You are out, and you do not come back. The discourse is really powerful. There are a lot of different people who interact on that page. As long as I keep throwing off people who are rude, it works. Of course, I go back and delete any rude things.

It sounds like that aspect of hopefulness is very community-focused, intersectional.

CB: It has to be! It has to be, by nature. If you go to do work in a community, no one gets left behind. If you’re in a white community organizing so black people can live there, and someone says something antisemitic, you point out, “You know, in our organization, there are a lot of Jews that have been working really hard on this project.” You do not have to be a genius just to stare at someone and say, “That was over the edge.” However, that kind of criticism requires the distance of having made many mistakes in the past.

Right, it is not antagonistically calling people out, but letting them know that what they have said is highly inappropriate and offensive.

CB: For me, anyways, if you want my respect, then you cannot say those kinds of things—you have lost my respect at that point.

During an organizing effort in Oregon, Loretta Ross, Suzanne Farr, and I developed a list of things to do when you go into a state. Do not build a narrative that is going to put another group at risk. It was really an operational strategy for organizers of intersectionality. You do not do any campaign that does not look at who is on the ground there, and you hold them in your hands. You are to respect them, but you hold them in your hands—this is very rural kind of talk, right?—you don’t let them drop. It is that simple, and it works. There were multiple, very complex coalitions that were built after that to stop some of these problems. A lot of people who were at that meeting went on to major positions in foundations and professional organizations, because they understood that intersectionality is not a tactic—it is a necessity.

Do you feel that more scholars need to be more involved with the methodologies of journalists and activists? You are talking a lot about this discrepancy between the top and the bottom—do you think there is a more effective way of approaching academic work?

CB: Go back to *Street Corner Society*, one of the foundational books about looking at small communities—there are all of these books by scholars who went into a community and merged into it as observers, but who were eventually welcomed as a part of that community. Rafael Ezequiel—*The Racist Mind*—studies racist skinheads in Boston. He starts out just sitting there

until someone asks, “What are you doing here?” He says, “Well, I’m a scholar. I’m working for a health study of what it’s like to be on the street in the group you’re in, how you survive, and get through this and that.” And they say, “Ah, fuck off.” But, little by little, they become part of the community. All good street-level sociologists become a part of the community, but, of course, knowing that they are not integral to it. Still, they become part of the communal furniture!—and eventually, because they treat the community with respect, which a lot of these marginal communities long for, they begin to talk to them, and at some point, there are honest conversations between a scholar and the person being studied. Everyone knows what the dynamic is, that this is a scholar, a person who studies XYZ, but they feel that the scholar has granted them the opportunity to say what they think and not be judged badly, that their persona, ideas, presentation of self in everyday society are acknowledged as being important to them—and the scholar recognizes that and records it.

I have had that experience repeatedly, talking to people who know fully who I am. I can call up leaders in various extreme, right, racist, antisemitic movements and check a quote with them on the phone or over the internet. They’ll say something like, “Chip, you fucking commie!” I will say, “Look, I need to know this.” They will say, “Okay, well, this is what I think.”

One good example, Art Jones, strategist for the Nazis, and I, a strategist for the anti-Nazis, got to know each other. One time, we were both at a demonstration, which completely fell apart. I got run over by mounted cops saving a group of Communists from 500 screaming white youth at one of these rallies in Market Park. I got run over. I am a city boy. I am there with my Nikon, waiting to get the best picture, and a horse rump twists me around on my knee. There was a very loud sound. I no longer can walk. So this Communist group I know comes over and says, “You look like you’re in bad shape. We’ll drive you over to your car,” which they did. So later, I’m in this knee cast, and both Art Jones and I were standing in line for a program with several leaders of White Nationalist and neo-Fascist and neo-Nazi groups. We had been invited on an Oprah Winfrey show about white supremacists in the Midwest, and I’m an audience plant. On the stage are all these people I have organized against, some of whom know me. I certainly know them. As we are waiting to go in, Art Jones sidles up to me, and I know he is not a threat. He looks at me and says, “Chip, what happened?” I say, “Oh, you remember that demonstration we were at, I had my camera up, and a horse rump hit me and twisted me around, and I’ve been in a cast for months.” He says, very seriously, “Chip, how’s the horse?” How can I not laugh? It was so deadpan! I know he is a Nazi, but it was funny! What can I tell you? He is a funny guy.

As you think about your long career as an organizer, why do you do what you do? As in, do you enjoy working with these extremist individuals? What gets you up in the morning when you are working with such upsetting ideas? I imagine it can be depressing, bring you down. Do you see yourself stopping any time soon?

CB: Yeah, I will probably die at some point! But I do not think I am going to stop any time. I find it much too interesting. I keep getting asked to write things. I get up in the morning and I think, “I can do a little bit to make the world a better place by treating everyone as having a basic humanity, and it is my skill level that will determine whether or not I can move them an inch

toward human rights." I have moved some people really far toward human rights. But I think my greatest efforts have been in communities to help people learn how to create a peaceful environment even in a group of people who will never get along.

Can you reach a kind of peace treaty in the neighborhood? Is there a way to explain to people that they are never going to get everything they want? That they are right that the American government has treated them badly, but their solution is not going to help? I think it helps to be someone who can say, "Yes, you've been screwed. But other people have been, too. So why would you turn on them?" It is partly that I am a Christian. I think we are put on this planet to do good. I have found a way to do good, and that satisfies me as an intellectual, a scholar, a journalist, an activist, but also as a person. I think I've done some good, and I hope I can do some more good. And I will still say I know a Nazi who can crack me up with a good joke. That does not mean I think he is doing good stuff. I just recognize that, somewhere in him, is a spark that can tell a funny joke. That means that someday, maybe someone will reach him.