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Comments on the NAM documents, presented to Radical America editorial board

(first draft-very rough)

The New American Movement describes itself as "not a vanguard revolutionary party: it is a mass membership organization for all the many people who have been moved to the left in the past several years but who have been unable to relate to the "movement" as currently constructed." It defines itself broadly as a mass organization that focuses on the general question of "what programs can we put forward ⁱⁿ this year or two that will help unify working people in a struggle against the ruling class and for socialism." It further suggests that those " who want more than that, who think that it is now possible on the basis of available information to chart out a full program for how to make the revolution, are encouraged to go elsewhere, this is not a new sect organization. That is not to say that people who have more explicitly worked out views than the analysis of this organization must not work in this organization. But they must see this organization for what it is and not try to change it into something different." After experiencing the New Left, one would like to sigh in relief that we're finally growing up, building on the basis of our experiences a non-sectarian structure that will allow for the resolution of differences and build a movement that seriously challenges capitalism. Unfortunately, the NAM's analysis has more holes in it than a piece of swiss cheese.

The major weakness of the NAM statement in full is its lack of a historical perspective on a history it sees itself continuing and a corresponding absence in its analysis of the existence of Capitalism as a system; Basic to that system is the unambiguous role of "class" The NAM avoids this, posing itself as a problem-solving network of "organizers" pragmatically going about their work. These criticisms ought not to be dismissed as implying the need for a full program. Rather, to take the NAM seriously is to demand that it begin its critique with its analysis of Capitalism as a totality, as a functional system, that is, to begin with the real world

and not with the wishes of organizers. Its strategic vagueness about the
(its reiteration of an ill-defined "democratic socialism" as a goal,
system), coupled with a glib dismissal of other tendencies (or even
orientations) as "sects" puts into ^{na}question even its tactical ^{wisdom.} abilities.

The underlying strategic assumption of the NAM is that the revolutionary opposi-
tion to capital is now largely in flux, that this is ^{largely} a problem of morale
and ^{the} ~~correctly~~ exercising ^{of} options, and that this can be dealt with through a
superior national organization. Staughton Lynd, presently an NAM
organizer, argues in the recent Ramparts that "it is clear that the movement requires
national organization. I think it is better to recognize this... than to deny it
and have the repressed awareness of the need erupt each four years like volcanic
lava. I think the next year or two can and should see the rebuilding of a national
movement." Lynd, I think, puts the question badly. It isn't to choose between
an organization or dissolution, but to judge which organizations are appropriate
for what forms of struggle. The ^{NAM} statement goes further in suggesting that "the
left has never had a greater possibility of reaching the American people than at the
present period. It could provide the leadership for ending the war and at the same ~~+~~
time speak to people about the ways in which the capitalist system is the cause
of the present crisis in American society." So the pressing need in a period
of quiet is to seize the time. Coordination is necessary, but the terrain is
familiar, and most important, the movement is continuous. The words "left"
and "movement" are used frequently and interchangeably. Radical America's
notion of the decline of SDS as a distinct ^{watershed} marking the decline of the student
movement and its inability to transcend itself doesn't find the faintest echo
in the NAM. The thrust here is on the continuity of the revolutionary
culture, read as politics. This assumes two linked postures; (1) a voluntarist
politics, and (2) a structural and therefore undialectical notion of "leaders
as professionals"

By voluntarism, I mean the fairly classical conception of the will
to create revolutionary situations regardless (and often in spite) of
objective conditions. ^{an} ~~for~~ example, Lynd, in Ramparts, exposes the pro-

business orientation of Nixon's NEP and suggests that" it is a tragedy that no national movement organization existed to respond, if only in words, to this proto-fascist plan." It is a tragedy; further, had a left existed, the plan would have been difficult to put into effect, and likely would have been shelved. But this again is a problematic, it assumes a left can exist, ^{at present} that sloth rather than objective historical conditions have made us miss opportunity after opportunity. The NAM statement amplifies Lynd's orientation-it asks "are we developing adequate programs that speak to our sisters and brothers in America who have not yet understood the need to struggle?" In one sense this is precisely the question that has to be asked, but to answer it assumes answering a prior set of questions, such as, can we humanly communicate concepts of liberation as other than ideological props?; that is, are our sisters and brothers in any position to respond and internalize these programs, ideas, in their own lives? There is an easy way to find out, and "organizers" will test program in the real world with or without an NAM (though NAM argues that the burn-out is extreme for those working in isolation.) This is not a sterile debate of theory/practice but the development of programs that do not squander precious resources and that stem from a class analysis of the real forces in motion in the society, ~~forces that were at one time~~

The NAM's position on leadership derives to some extent (or overlaps) Rich Rothstein's critique of the demise of SDS. He argues that the fetishizing of democracy destroyed real democracy (representative) with structures, accountability, and, hence, competent leaders. This argument completely misunderstood the ^{dimension of} process in the development of the anti-authoritarian left as a social movement. It also begs the practical question of why this movement increasingly thrust mediocrities forward and punished competence. To answer this would require a discussion of the history and development of the movement, something that gets in the way of organization building. Rothstein's analysis is structural ^{as} and is much of the statement: "in the name of making relationships in the movement more humane

and less based on authority figures and male chauvinism, the movement focuses on fighting itself and has become ~~less humane~~ more inhumane and less sensitive." For the NAM, there is a real alternative to inwardness and back-biting, that is, "a left that has a program, a vision, and is willing to provide leadership (which) is indispensable for the American Revolution. That vision and program can not be arbitrarily imposed on the American experience, but must emerge organically from ~~it~~ a thorough understanding of American society." I would argue that precisely because of the free-floating quality of the present movement (the fact that it is no longer a movement), by definition a leadership emerging from this movement, without (at least) a rigorous understanding of its revolutionary limitations (of course its possibilities as well) would of necessity be arbitrary, would continuously be second-guessing precisely those emerging groups it sought to aid. Again, this is not to imply that individual radicals do nothing in an emerging period, but that to a large extent ^{they should be clear that} their movement past is so much extra baggage.

The NAM's articulated politics seems equally distorted, and in many ways a mirror image of the former Movements. It criticizes harshly the movement for its eccentric life styles, leaving it at the level of styles, and replaces it with a left pluralism, non-sectarian to be sure, ^{but far to the right of the old movement and in many ways a retreat.} As the student movement broke out of its university shell, with its strong core of political morality, it developed an analysis of imperialism that went beyond its primitive notions of power, and ^{much} more important, it accepted the Maoist definition of the world revolution. For the student movement this implied less an adherence to this or that revolutionary thinker ^(Lenin, etc) than an understanding of ^{concrete} divisions in the working class, ^{based on imperialism} This vision was partial, ^{wholly} and not ^{or fragmented} devoid of the old morality (Aronowitz called the Weathermen "revolutionary liberals") and it fell ^{not the least} because it ceased to see itself, as any longer a movement for its own liberation. The NAM does not deal with this seriously, instead viewing it as creating X number of errors that a national coordinating effort will correct.

Where the old movement was somewhat sectarian, the NAM comes close to amalgamating with everyone but bankers, gamblers, and the top sixty families. It does not acknowledge, let alone deal with contradictions in its own movement. When it deals, for instance, with sexism, it makes perfunctory statements about the need to "fight it" while assuming that the good people will give it up when they come to see it as false privilege. Similarly, in developing a mass line around the war, the NAM degenerates to the economism of "everyone's standing to lose by the draft," particularly white ethnics whom they hope to appeal to. If indeed ~~some~~ 50% of the student age population ⁽¹⁸⁻²³⁾ attend some form of college, then the burden of the draft falls on those without college deferments (a disproportionately large number of third world men) and an orientation around universal resentment of the draft is self-serving. The NAM even intimates that the Pentagon is the primary target for anti-war agitation, that at this point even the liberal establishment is quaking. The electoral orientation bears more of a resemblance to the CP's anti-monopoly front than to a class defense of living standards.

Strange styles are excusable in a cultural movement, they are often *as not possible new* metaphors for basic changes along ~~promising~~ directions. What does one say about the NAM's adaptation to a Revolutionary Nationalist position in the heartland of the American Empire. The NAM short statement suggests:

The American people who have time and again shown ^{LOP} passion and courage have the opportunity to respond to the present crisis. We can take back our country and build on what is good and decent in our history a new future for us all... The land we built with our labor and our blood no longer seems our land... (we have) a vision with roots deep in the American soil. We stand in the tradition of American communities which aided each other in times of need. We are heirs to the struggles against tyranny and ruthless power. We share the faith of our ancestors in the ability of ordinary people to decide their own future in decentralized, democratic communities... With faith in the American people, pride in our traditions, and militant opposition to tyranny of any form, we are beginning now.

To be charitable, this can be seen as a corrective to the left's rabid

anti-Americanism, but its unfortunate. The history of America, unlike that of a colonially oppressed nation, is the history of that oppression. We are descended from George Custer, not ^{from} Sitting Bull. A history of the American people is not a cooperative history of the struggles to build America from sea to sea. Rather, it, ~~is~~ ^{should be seen as} a sociology of survival., that is, the development of survival techniques in the mother country, techniques that ran against European notions of class solidarity. The plans of the

~~NAM for a 1776 centennial seem like theatrics. This may ultimately be the most damning criticism of the NAM. One can grant a certain latitude in loosely defining the components of an embryonic organization. With all specific criticisms, there are various levels that and groups vying for hegemony will have to operate on. This appeal to a bankrupt patriotism must be considered outside of the realm. As with the young Patriots who degenerated into printing Confederate flags you're ultimately relating to people on the basis of a lie. With all the NAM's talk of Democracy and correct leadership~~

Similarly, how do you begin to understand the NAM's fascination with the plans for an upcoming Independence centennial. Rather than using this as a tactic, the Left's bantering about patriotism *in fact* further concretizes bourgeois hegemony, precisely at a time that autonomous groups are making breaks with the culture.

When Trotsky was in London at the turn of the century, he was ushered around by Lenin, who showed him the sights, "their Big Ben, their Parliament." ~~Maybe this country does belong to the NAM, it doesn't belong to me. I'm not American.~~

Was Lenin a Great Russian Chauvinist?