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Book Review: Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Interracial Solidarity in 1960s-70s New Left Organizing.* New York: Melville House. 2021. ISBN: 978-1612199412 (Paperback). 320 Pages. $15.99.

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> *We've got to face the fact that some people say you fight fire best with fire, but we say you put fire out best with water. We say you don't fight racism with racism. We're gonna fight racism with solidarity*.
>
> -Fred Hampton

The tenth anniversary revised and updated edition of *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Interracial Solidarity in 1960s-70s New Left Organizing* is a critical retelling of New Left politics in the United States. This retelling should be of interest to historians, political scientists, sociologists, community organizers, and anyone concerned with the possibilities and challenges of creating a meaningfully inclusive society. It should be of interest to this diverse audience for the following reasons.

First, *Hillbilly Nationalists* should be of interest to this diverse audience for its recounting of the historical mistreatment of poor Whites in the United States. This mistreatment includes their impoverishment, their disenfranchisement, their criminalization, their use as fodder in countless bloody conflicts, and their perpetual disparagement in popular culture. Through their recounting of the mistreatment of poor Whites in the United States the authors simultaneously chronicle the harshness of

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their collective experience and accentuate the similarities between that experience and the experiences of other dispossessed groups.

Second, *Hillbilly Nationalists* should be of interest to this diverse audience for its depictions of several 1960s and 1970s poor White political organizations. The organizations depicted are Jobs or Income Now (JOIN), Young Patriots, Rising Up Angry, October 4th Organization, and White Lightning: poor White groups that, like their more privileged contemporaries on college campuses, organized around issues including poverty, substandard housing, inadequate healthcare, draconian drug laws, police brutality, the war in Vietnam, and racial injustice. The authors leaven their depictions with profiles of prominent members of these organizations, the most notable of whom is certainly Peggy Terry who was born into poverty in Oklahoma and went on to become an influential figure in JOIN and who appeared as Eldridge Cleaver's running mate on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket in the 1968 presidential election. Through their treatments of these organizations and individuals the authors discredit the oft-peddled stereotype of poor Whites as uniformly reactionary and racist.

Third, *Hillbilly Nationalists* should be of interest to this diverse audience for its portrayal of the Rainbow Coalition: a multiracial alliance of radical groups launched in Chicago by Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Bob Lee in April of 1969. The organizational pillars of this coalition were the Chicago Black Panther Party, the aforementioned Young Patriots, and the Young Lords (a politicized Puerto Rican gang). While these coalition members steadfastly maintained their autonomy, they came together to provide mutual security at public events, take part in demonstrations, conduct political education classes, and administer the Rainbow Food Program. Given its radical and inclusive agenda, it is not surprising that the ruling class soon declared war on this coalition leading to its relatively swift demise; the most shameful act of that war being the murder of Fred Hampton by Chicago police officers with the aid of an FBI informant in December of 1969. Through their portrayal of the tragically short-lived Rainbow Coalition and its member organizations the authors draw attention to an historically important and underappreciated alliance while further discrediting the stereotype of poor Whites as uniformly reactionary and racist.

Fourth, *Hillbilly Nationalists* should be of interest to this diverse audience for its delineation of the factors that contributed to the collapses of the poor White organizations featured in this work. Among the most important such factors were relentless governmental persecution, the presence of racism in poor White communities, and the successful

cultivation of that presence by the developing New Right. And while governmental persecution was clearly the most damaging of these factors, the authors readily acknowledge that racism among their constituents was an ongoing challenge for these groups. Through their organizational postmortems the authors demonstrate the precariousness of inclusive poor White radicalism in the face of historically entrenched racial hierarchies and established interests that are determined to protect and exploit those hierarchies.

Fifth, *Hillbilly Nationalists* should be of interest to this diverse audience for its account of the impact of classism on 1960s and 1970s New Left politics. This account includes excerpts from mainstream newspapers and magazines that use stunningly hateful language to describe poor Whites from the South and the threat they pose to civil society; reports of college activists using similar language to justify their lack of engagement with poor White communities; and examples of poor Whites variously responding to their purported otherness with shame, defiance, and disengagement. Through their exposure of the extent to which the denigration of poor Whites was a barrier to their wholesale participation in New Left politics the authors reveal the price that self-styled radicals of the day paid for their classist arrogance.

Finally, *Hillbilly Nationalists* should be of interest to this diverse audience for its assessment of our prospects for moving toward a more meaningfully inclusive society. The authors suggest that despite some challenges these prospects remain promising for a number of reasons. To begin with, the ascendency of the New Right and its regressive agenda along with a spate of high-profile police killings of Black citizens has resulted in a marked growth in the number and variety of people and organizations (including poor White people and organizations) calling for social equality. In addition, explanations of social inequalities that focus on traditional monolithic categories are increasingly being jettisoned (both inside and outside of academics) in favor of more nuanced and inclusive categories that recognize the interaction of race, class, and gender. Furthermore, contemporary activists have the history of the New Left to remind them of the inadvisability of alienating poor Whites from progressive social movements. Lastly, contemporary activists have the legacy of the Rainbow Coalition and its member organizations from which to draw both inspiration and insight. Through their guardedly optimistic assessment of our prospects for moving toward a more meaningfully inclusive society the authors provide a welcome ray of hope regarding our collective future.

In sum, I find *Hillbilly Nationalists* to be laudable for its apt repositioning of poor Whites in United States History, its elucidation of the rise and fall of poor White radicalism in the 1960s and 1970s, its celebration of the oft-neglected Rainbow Coalition, its cautionary note on the dangers of classism in progressive circles, and its hopeful vision of the future. As such, I highly recommend it as a discerning account of where we have been, where we are, and where we could be heading on our journey to create a recognizably inclusive society.

While I appreciate the many merits of the revised and updated edition of *Hillbilly Nationalists*, I find myself wishing that the authors had addressed our current political environment in greater detail. To be fair, this was never the primary focus of their work and they do note a number of positive recent developments, as indicated above. They also note some disturbing recent developments including the world-wide resurgence of authoritarianism, the proliferation of White supremacist groups and ideologies in this country, and the use of evolving technologies by those and other right-wing groups to disseminate disinformation calculated to stoke the anxieties of Whites, especially poor Whites – developments that will surely challenge our invigorated efforts to create a meaningfully inclusive society and hence the authors' *guarded* optimism. Even so, it seems to me that there are yet other developments that warrant attention; developments that transcend political ideologies and that could ultimately render us incapable of engaging in the types of effective discourses envisioned by the authors.

One development that threatens future political discourses is the emergence of what Lasch (1979) refers to as the culture of narcissism. According to Lasch, the latter half of the twentieth century was characterized by the transition from capitalist production to consumption, the increasing bureaucratization and impersonalization of life, and the onset of widespread pessimism about the future. Consequently, we have lost our connections to both one another and to history, resulting in our becoming obsessed with the present and our places therein. That is, in our becoming participants in a culture of narcissism. Among the personality traits associated with this culture are a craving for social approval, an obsession with images and brands, and a fascination with celebrity. In the political realm, these traits translate into political agendas that serve personal rather than ideological ends, political arguments that prioritize expediency over truth, political actions that favor theatricality over substance, and political allegiances that are fragile at best. And while none of these traits are entirely unique to the

present, their contemporary prevalence and normalization seem unprecedented.

Another development that threatens future political discourses is our movement toward a post-truth society. Schindler (2024) attributes this movement to neoliberal policies that were instituted by left-center politicians beginning in the 1990s; policies that introduced competition into virtually every aspect of economic life including (and most dramatically) areas that were once the domain of government agencies. As a result, competitive self-interest came to be understood as a necessary and legitimate motivation for organizations and individuals. Unfortunately, over time competitive self-interest came to be understood across the political spectrum as the *only* motivation for organizations and individuals, resulting in an astounding cynicism regarding the actions and utterances of others. Astounding in the sense that we now countenance the existence of "alternative facts" and "fake news" to cite just two recent troublesome additions to our lexicon. What we do not countenance is the notion that a truth claim can reflect something other than the selfish agenda of the organization or person making that claim. And while cynicism is certainly not unique to the present, its contemporary normalization (what Shindler calls "dogmatic cynicism") seems unprecedented.

A final development that threatens future political discourses for our purposes is the explosion in political incivility this country has experienced over the past ten years. Finley, Esposito, and Johnson (2018) argue that such incivility reached new heights during the buildup to the 2016 presidential election when both candidates made remarkably nasty comments about the opposing party and its supporters and has continued unabated ever since. They attribute this rise in incivility to the fact that neoliberalism has made life precarious for virtually everyone, which has brought naked self-interest to the fore and thereby eroded trust, encouraged cynicism, diminished empathy, and fixated individuals on establishing their dominance over others. Consequently, people on both the left and the right increasingly perceive any violation of their sensibilities as a provocation for which retribution must be exacted, even if the violation comes from someone with whom they were allied up to that point. Hence, we now face a situation where to speak out about virtually anything is to risk your friendships, your reputation, your livelihood, and perhaps your physical safety. And while incivility in politics has a long history in this country, its contemporary normalization seems unprecedented.

The catastrophic nature of these developments (which I see manifested every day) occurred to me on a number of occasions during my reading of *Hillbilly Nationalists*, but never so forcefully as when I was reading about the Young Patriots organization and its relationship with the Confederate flag. This topic in particular resonated with me because I find that history to be an exemplar of progressive political discourse; an exemplar that I fear we cannot begin to approach in our current narcissistic, post-truth, and uncivil political environment.

When the Young Patriots first began organizing in Chicago in 1968, they adopted the Confederate flag – which they sewed onto berets and denim vests – as one of their symbols. They did so in part to appeal to poor White Appalachian immigrants and their descendants in communities where they were recruiting; poor Whites who perceived the Confederate flag as a sign of rebellion and a tribute to dispossessed Southerners who were sacrificed in a war fought over the competing interests of elites. The Young Patriots continued to display this flag even after the formation of the Rainbow Coalition. In fact, Young Patriots members displayed the Confederate flag on their clothing at a Black Panther Party conference in 1969 in their first public appearance as coalition members. And while displaying what is widely perceived to be a racist symbol around targets of racism is anything but impressive, the response of Black Panther leaders was quite impressive: they greeted the Patriots as fellow revolutionaries. Panther leader Bob Lee even went as far as endorsing the use of the Confederate flag so long as the Patriots were willing to defend their choice. This despite the fact that not all Black Panthers (or Young Lords) were in favor of an alliance with poor Whites in the first place, resulting in defections from both organizations. What is equally impressive in my view is the fact that the Young Patriots soon began to surround their flags with Black Panther, Rainbow Coalition, and "Free Huey" buttons on their way to discarding the Confederate flag altogether.

I refer to the preceding events as an exemplar of progressive political discourse because they demonstrate what I view to be two essential components of such discourse: charity and humility. Charity on the part of Bob Lee and other Panther leaders in terms of their willingness to welcome the Patriots to their conference despite the egregious connotations of the Confederate flag. Humility on the part of Young Patriots leaders for their willingness to recognize and remedy their initial callousness. And while I am certain that grace and humility exist today, I am equally certain that their expression is curtailed by the previously mentioned developments. So much so that I cannot imagine a display of

the Confederate flag in a contemporary setting resulting in anything but self-serving vilification, vitriolic confrontation, and possible bloodshed – all of which are clearly inimical to progressive discourse and would no doubt preclude the kind of transformation experienced by the Patriots in the scenario described above. Moreover, I am convinced that the same would be true regarding the display of what are perceived to be overtly leftist symbols as well. A disturbing state of affairs in my view.

I present the foregoing dissertation on the origins and implications of our increasingly entrenched political intolerance because this intolerance is at the root of my earlier lament that the reissuing of *Hillbilly Nationalists* did not provide the authors with occasion to address our contemporary political climate in more detail. That is, while I laud their guarded optimism, I could use a little more convincing.

My lengthy lament aside, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Interracial Solidarity in 1960s-70s New Left Organizing* is an informative and thought-provoking treatment of the possibilities and challenges that we have encountered and will likely continue to encounter in our efforts to transcend the manufactured divisions that have thwarted solidarity among the dispossessed in this country for centuries. It is also a treatment that is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of poignant accounts of both harrowing and exhilarating encounters, striking photographs of the people and events described in its pages, inspiring quotes like the one that appears at the beginning of this review, and the astonishing answers to questions like "Which prominent civil rights organization endorsed George Wallace in his first run for governor of Alabama?" and "Which notorious Chicago outfit once provided security for the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. when he visited that city?" For all of these reasons, I found this book to be an absolute pleasure from beginning to end.

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