

A Revisionist View of the Young Lords

The Young Lords organization originated in Chicago in the early 1960's. The Lords first public campaign aimed at preventing the displacement of Puerto Rican families from the Lincoln Park area in Chicago. In December of 1969 the New York City chapter occupied the First Methodist Church in East Harlem and the organization gained national attention. Shortly after, new chapters were opened in Philadelphia, Bridgeport, Newark, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Hayward and other cities with large concentrations of Puerto Ricans.

Like many other civil rights organization at the time, the Young Lords political platform called for, the end of the Viet Nam war, solidarity among Latinos and other minority groups, solidarity with the Third World, and gender and racial equity, among others. What made the organization uniquely Puerto Rican was their priority to struggle for the empowerment of the Puerto Rican community and their support for the independence of Puerto Rico. However, two tenets of their programmatic platform were the most contentious: a call for armed self-defense and armed struggle, and a call for a socialist society.

Crippled by FBI covert counter intelligence operations and common confrontation with local authorities, and subdued by internal divisions, the intensity of the Young Lords movement lasted only a relative short period of time. However, their legacy in terms of consciousness and fueling the nascent Puerto Rican civil rights and political movement has endured the passage of time. By the late 1970's, the leadership of the Young Lords began to evolve into a diverse set of strategies ranging from the support for the freedom of the Puerto Rican nationalist leaders, to the formation of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, to the engagement of electoral and community campaigns.

With over forty years of historical evidence, the question is how we embrace their legacy.

Undoubtedly, the historical significance of the Young Lords occupies a prominent place among civil rights organizations and the Puerto Rican community in the United States. The Young Lords represented a turning point for Puerto Rican identity in the United States. A second generation of young Puerto Ricans, like many other groups, voiced their claims to "clothing, free food, education, health care, transportation, utilities, and employment for all." These claims ultimately were an integral element of the mobilization for empowerment, the development of community organizations, and political awakening. Though the question of the political affiliation of Puerto Rico to the United States is still open, the Young Lords brought the status debate to stateside communities by questioning the Island's Commonwealth status and rejecting statehood as a long term solution.

Today not all embrace the Young Lords' legacy. Their call for armed self-defense and armed struggle is cited as evidence of anti-Americanism and obvious disregard for democratic values. However, such judgment should be tempered by the social context and the historical period in which the organization emerged. For one, many young people in Puerto Rican neighborhoods were marginalized, abandoned by schools and few opportunities for jobs and social mobility. The core leadership of the Young Lords in Chicago evolved from a street gang into an activist community group against the displacement of the Puerto Rican community in Lincoln Park. Disenfranchised Puerto Rican youth fueled the movement across the nation. The fact that the Young Lords movement gained such momentum across the country is a testament to the role of marginalization as a preamble to community mobilization and institutional building. In New York, as in many other cities, Puerto Ricans engaged in social issues such as police

brutality and abuses, access to health care, equal educational opportunities and tenant's rights. It was precisely this struggle for democratic rights for Puerto Ricans which brought the Young Lords into confrontations with the police and political authorities and provided a rationalization for FBI infiltration and subsequent demise of the organization.

Given the context for the struggle for social justice and the tactics deployed by the authorities, it is understandable the Young Lords call for armed self-defense and armed struggle. The fact that the Young Lords always refer to this aspect of their platform "self-defense" is important. Recall that Martin Luther King was assassinated in April 4, 1968 and Robert Kennedy shortly after in June 6 of the same year. A few months later, in September 1969, Rev. Bruce Johnson a pastor in the United Methodist Church and his wife Eugenia were stabbed to death. Zealous supporters of the Young Lords, the national headquarters of the organization was located in the church. It is in this context that the New York chapter decides to take over the First Spanish Methodist Church in East Harlem. The "self-defense" distinction is important. Though some of the leaders were accused of various criminal charges such as gun possession and in one case a hostage charge, the Young Lords as an organization were never accused of arm robberies or other violent acts typically associated with other radicalized segments of the Puerto Rican left or the anti-war left more generally. The vast majority of the Lords leadership eventually evolved into a host of organizations engaged in the struggle for democratic rights for Puerto Ricans, such as the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights (NCPRR).

All in all, the Young Lords became a movement centered on the empowerment of Puerto Rican communities in the United States and mark a vital historical turning point. Despite the radical rhetoric of the times and the obvious challenge to authorities, not to mention their embracing of armed self-defense and symbolic actions such as the occupation of the First Methodist Church in East Harlem, their legacy is about the definition of a Puerto Rican identity in the Diaspora, an affirmation of their rights as citizens to equal treatment and protections under the law, access to health care and education, and instilling a sense of pride in their heritage and their people. Such legacy merits recognition and celebration, and transcending the confines of the well deserved acknowledgment of the Puerto Rican community as a whole.