Interview with Chris Riddiough

Victor Cohen

Chris Riddiough affiliated with the New American Movement (NAM) in 1977, along with the other members of the Blazing Star chapter of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (CWLU). Blazing Star was an action-oriented work group of the Women's Union that focused on lesbian and gay rights, and as the Women's Union was folding, its members joined NAM because they felt it shared their commitment to socialist-feminism. Riddiough was more than familiar with this concept: in 1972, with other CWLU members, she wrote "Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism," which became an official position paper of the CWLU.

In Blazing Star NAM, Riddiough continued organizing others around lesbian and gay issues throughout the metropolitan Chicago region. Additionally, she helped edit NAM's bulletin, *Women Organizing*, and served on NAM's Socialist Feminist Commission, the organization's national commission that helped to inform NAM's general political strategy. Riddiough was part of NAM's leadership when it merged with the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) and served on the National Political Committee of the newly-formed Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) through 1984. When Riddiough moved to Washington, D.C. that year, she ceased serving as a DSA leader, but she returned to serve as Political Director of DSA from 1996–1999, where she helped shape DSA's policy and programs. Today, besides working as a programming trainer at the SAS Institute, Riddiough remains a Vice-Chair of DSA.

This interview took place over the phone on October 8, 2008.

Victor Cohen: How did you come to the Left and to the women's liberation movement in particular?

Chris Riddiough: When I was in high school—it would have been about 1963—a friend of mine, for my birthday, gave me Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, and it was like the proverbial light bulb going off in my head. I realized there were options for women other than being a wife and a mother. I went to Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota in '64, got involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement, and remained involved in that throughout college. In '68, I went to graduate school for astrophysics at Northwestern University in Chicago. There, I met Ellen DuBois, who invited me to a women's group on campus. She's since written a number of things on women's history, but back then she was a graduate student like me. I went to the meeting, and around 1969, I got involved in a group that later became part of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union.

Through Ellen, and later Vivian Rothstein, I got involved in the Liberation School for Women and then in a variety of other activities in the Women's Union.

Cohen: Did you come from a progressive household?

Riddiough: Sort of. My mother, who grew up in the 1930s, was from a Republican family. My father, on the other hand, never talked much about his political background. After he died, I found his scrapbook, and it turns out he had been involved in Left politics in Utah, of all places. Dad was born in 1892, and in 1920 he ran for county clerk in Ogden on the Socialist party ticket, which Eugene V. Debs was heading up.

When I was born in 1946, he hadn't talked about politics for years. My parents were pretty much Stevenson Democrats—liberal Democrats—so they had moved into that party. They were interested in politics and encouraged my political interests, even though they weren't very active themselves.

Cohen: Did participating in the antiwar movement in college radicalize you?

Riddiough: Oh, absolutely. When I went to college, I was a bleeding-heart liberal but very patriotic. On my dorm floor, our resident assistant was a Quaker, and the first time I heard her talking about how bad things were in Vietnam, I was appalled that someone could be critical of the United States. But as I started reading about the war, I began to feel she was right. That ultimately led me to read about broader issues related to U.S. foreign policy, about the Civil Rights movement, and eventually about the beginnings of the women's movement. In that way, my RA started me thinking in a more radical, and ultimately a socialist-feminist, perspective.

Of course, being a female graduate student in astrophysics enhanced my political development as well. When I applied, two of the top three graduate schools in astronomy didn't admit women. I was the second woman admitted to the astronomy department in the history of Northwestern University. One of my professors said he wouldn't give women A's because we were taking up space that men should have. So that was fairly radicalizing.

Ultimately I dropped out of graduate school and spent 20 years doing political work rather than science or anything related to it.

Cohen: What made the women's movement and the Women's Liberation Union more compelling than a career in science?

Riddiough: Partly, it was my experience in school and the attitude towards women in science. But my involvement in the anti-Vietnam War movement made me want to do something more powerful than work for the National Organization for Women, even though there were a lot of radical women in NOW then, and still are.

Also at that time, I was coming out as a lesbian, and I felt as if there was more acceptance in the Women's Union. I never found NOW to be antilesbian, although it had that reputation in some circles.

Cohen: What was the relationship of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union to the Blazing Star group, which later joined NAM?

Riddiough: Blazing Star was the Women's Union work group. The Women's Union had chapters that functioned like community discussion groups—they would get together to read something or to be support groups. There were also work groups specifically focused on a project, like health care, or Direct Action for Rights in Employment, or Action Committee for Decent Child Care. Around 1972, a lesbian group formed from the Liberation School, and a little later Blazing Star was formed from that. It was action-oriented and organized around lesbian and gay rights. When the Women's Union folded around 1977, those of us in Blazing Star had some discussion about wanting to keep the group together, and we ultimately decided to affiliate with NAM.

Cohen: How did Blazing Star come to that decision? Why NAM of the choices that were out there?

Riddiough: Well, the Women's Union political perspective was always socialist-feminist, and Blazing Star was a realization of that, in terms of organizing around lesbian and gay rights, particularly lesbian issues. When the Women's Union folded, we wanted to keep raising political issues in Chicago's lesbian community. We looked at working within NOW or NAM and felt NAM's politics were fairly close to our own. Even though some NAM members were men, NAM was socialist-feminist oriented. There certainly weren't any other particularly feminist Left groups. One issue the Women's Union always faced was constant invasion by left-wing groups who had no commitment to women's liberation. Conversely, some NAM members were also members of the Women's Union because of their commitment to feminism and socialism.

In the Women's Union, there was real emphasis on putting together political theory and practice. That was something we liked about NAM as well. While there were discussions of what might be considered fairly esoteric political theory, there was always an effort to tie it back to actual political work.

Cohen: What kinds of organizing was Blazing Star doing in Chicago's lesbian community?

Riddiough: A couple of things. We published our own newsletter. Looking back, it was fairly amateurish, but at the time, it was not too bad. It contained articles about individual person's situations and what was going on politically. We would distribute it in the lesbian bars and other areas around the city and talk to people. It was a model used by Rising Up Angry, another local group that organized communities. Some of us also worked on lesbian and gay rights legislation through the Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which did more traditional legislative lobbying. We worked with groups like the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Metropolitan Chicago, which was formed initially to bring together fairly disparate groups in the gay

and lesbian community. In the late 1970s, the Coalition became heavily involved with the anti-Anita Bryant protests occurring around the country. We did some fairly interesting and good things, but because we were also fairly small groups, we didn't accomplish as much as we would have liked.

Cohen: What did the gay community think when you approached them as part of Blazing Star, an open socialist-feminist group?

Riddiough: Most people were okay with it. At that time, the gay movement was still calling itself "the gay liberation front," suggesting militancy. So anyone who was in any way sympathetic to gay and lesbian rights was a friend, an ally. There were tensions, but there was also a defined gay and lesbian community. During the Women's Union period, there was more tension with some of the lesbian groups. They expressed a whole range of lesbian feminist opinions, from separatism to more mainstream lesbian rights positions. Many of the separatist-oriented groups felt those of us in the Women's Union weren't really good lesbians because we would work with straight women. Working with men in NAM, then, was really over the edge. The gay male Republicans looked askance at some of our political views, but actually, there wasn't quite the level of tension there was with the lesbian separatists.

It was a strange time in many ways. I remember a group called Chicago Lesbian Liberation. They met every week, and every week there would be 100 women at the meeting, but it would be almost a different 100 women every week. Of course, in those days you could get a hundred people to come out every week; I don't think you could do that today.

Cohen: Once Blazing Star became part of the New American Movement, did that affect the activities you carried out?

Riddiough: Yes. We continued to do a lot of the same things, but the way we did them changed. We entered NAM wanting to organize for NAM, but also as members of NAM. We wanted to participate in the political discussions and bring in a lesbian socialist-feminist. Holly Graff helped take us in that direction. In some ways, she was the real driving force behind feminism within NAM at a national level.

NAM was made up of people with different perspectives, so some people were probably less supportive than others, but I never felt real negativism. Instead, I felt others recognized the need to heighten the visibility of feminist, gay and lesbian issues in NAM. There were many conversations about making sure feminism was central to NAM's discussions.

One thing I found particularly insightful and helpful was the education Holly and Richard [Healey] did on Gramsci, and how to relate that to socialist-feminism and organizing. That was very important in terms of my political thinking, and I think for other folks as well.

Cohen: What about that struck you so much?

Riddiough: I think Holly and Richard were able to lay out really well Gramsci's concept of the "war of position" and the "war of movement." That really struck a chord with how we had thought about organizing in the Women's Union. I mentioned Rising Up Angry; they had a slogan: "start from where people are at," and that was something we tried to do. You didn't walk up to somebody on the street and start talking about lesbian liberation or socialism. You had a conversation and tried to connect their lives with what you were thinking politically, and that's what Gramsci talked about on a more ideological-theoretical level.

Cohen: Could you say more about what gay liberation meant at that time? Was it freedom from gay oppression, was it social transformation, or did this depend on what kind of political-cultural group you were a part of?

Riddiough: It did depend on what political group you were part of. We had an overall sense that you wanted to work for more gay visibility, for gay and lesbian rights legislation—those were components of it. But we did more practical work around these issues, too. The Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force would go down to the police academy and talk to them about the gay community to try to prevent the police from beating up people leaving gay bars. Or, we would talk to high school students about being gay. This was when there was no real discussion in high schools about sexuality. Just being there and showing students that gay people were actually out was important.

Cohen: You eventually became involved with the leadership of NAM. What was your take on the merger with DSOC [the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee], and the formation of the Democratic Socialists of America [DSA]?

Riddiough: Well, at the time I supported it, and I think most of NAM's leadership did. We felt NAM had gone about as far as it could go. NAM had some strengths that DSOC didn't and vice-versa—DSOC had more visible leadership in Michael Harrington, and more connections, and we thought more money, which turned out not to be the case.

Looking back, I have very mixed feelings about the merger. I'm not sure NAM would have survived any longer without DSOC, but I also think the ultimate outcome was NAM and most of its leadership disappeared. I mean, we're still out there, and active—Richard [Healey] has been working on lots of stuff over the years. But the DSA that came out of the merger was much more a reconstruction of DSOC. Had there been any other way to go, the results might have been better. But hindsight is always wonderful.

Cohen: Why do you think NAM stopped growing? When I read through the literature from its later years, it seems to have become a better organization—more coherent and organized.

Riddiough: That's a good question. I'm not really sure. Part of it may have been the political atmosphere of the early '80s in the U.S. and the sense that things were moving in a different direction.

Also, around the early 1980s, a couple of issues in the liberal Left were problematic for NAM. One was the formation of interest groups that focused on a particular issue or community. This was driven partly by identity politics, but it was also the environmental movement as well, as an example. There was resistance on the Left to any kind of political perspective that tried to pull the pieces together into a comprehensive Left position. People who worked for these organizations had a very liberal world view but were reluctant to put that into practice. And, it was often the same people—one day they could be working for an environmental organization, and the next day they'd take a job at a gay organization. NAM wasn't strong enough to fight that. My perspective, from being here in Washington, is that it's not so much about organizing as it is about lobbying. The Left came here and hired lobbyists and tried to emulate the big organizations on the Right, but they didn't have the wherewithal to do it. That really changed left-liberal politics for the worse.

Many of these organizations did a lot of good, and there's certainly a need for them, but there was a need for something more cohesive, and NAM just wasn't strong enough. Ultimately, it lost out.

Cohen: Did DSOC welcome the issues that Blazing Star worked on as NAM?

Riddiough: Well, no. There were DSOC people, like Ruth Spitz, who were clearly interested in feminism. I knew she and some of the other women in DSOC were eager to get NAM people in because they knew we had a real feminist orientation. But there were people in DSOC who thought this was just nonsense. I remember, after the merger, going to a DSA convention, and Irving Howe was talking about trying to bring up a new generation of leadership in DSA. As he talked, you could tell he was talking about the young white men, like Harrington, and he wanted no part of feminism. Mike was somewhere in between. He wasn't in the position Howe was in, but I don't know whether he'd ever say he was a feminist. There were mixed feelings that this was going to be an uphill struggle within DSA, but I don't think this was what made problems for the whole merger.

I think the whole feminist, gay, and lesbian issues were the areas where NAM was really bringing something to the table with this merger. NAM believed socialism had to be redefined to include feminism and gay and lesbian liberation. In DSA and DSOC, a set of folks saw identity politics as a distraction, more so than, I feel, people within NAM did.

Cohen: What do you think about NAM's inability to attract members from the African American or other ethnic communities?

Riddiough: There were attempts to try and make sure the organization's leadership had people of color in it, and we did outreach to

different communities of color, but not very successfully. I had an interesting e-mail discussion earlier this year with a friend of mine, and he was asking "Why don't women support Hillary in a way that many African-Americans support Obama?" My response, which gets at the issue of people of color in NAM, is that there isn't a women's community in the same way there is an African-American community, or a Latino community. Women are in all parts of society, but there was a separate African-American community. It was possible then, and still is to some extent today, to live completely separate lives [from the African-American community], which means that the politics often are separable as well. The gay and the lesbian communities are a little different in the sense that they are more unified than women are, and there is often in urban areas a geographic location for the gay community, too. The gay or lesbian community is not one you're necessarily born into, and that makes a difference as well. Somebody could be part of the gay community but also have been a "red diaper baby" and come into NAM through that.

As I look back, I think that was a component of American politics that NAM tried to overcome but was never very successful at doing so. There were always some people of color in NAM and some in the leadership, but not many. I think that's true today of most liberal progressive organizations. They are in coalitions with people of color, but there isn't quite the interconnectedness that would be good.

Cohen: I think you explain that quite well. Certainly, there was no shortage of discussions, literature about racism in NAM, or desire to overcome it.

Riddiough: There was a clear sense that fighting racism was important, that it was a cornerstone of socialism and socialist-feminism, and many people coming into NAM got their feet wet in the Civil Rights movement in the '60s. But the people who came to NAM would have been the white-collar students from the early '60s rather than the people who were the black college students at the time, or members of the SCLC or another black organization of the time.

Cohen: After the merger, you were involved with DSA, correct? In what capacity?

Riddiough: I was on the National Political Committee for probably a couple of years, into '83 and '84. By then, I'd moved to Washington and was working for the National Organization for Women on the lesbian rights program, and then for the Gay and Lesbian Democrats for a while. Sometime in the mid-'80s, I got fairly disenchanted. I think many other NAM people did, too, earlier than I, at DSA's failure to incorporate NAM members' ideas. DSA's leadership really was centered in New York and comprised of many former DSOC leaders. There didn't seem to be a way for former NAM members to have any influence in DSA.

I maintained my DSA membership over the years, but I was largely inactive until probably sometime in the 1990s, when I got back on the National Political Committee. Michael Lighty was the National

Director of DSA, and he had a lot of good ideas and put a lot of new energy into DSA. For a while it looked as if DSA might actually take off. But then it sputtered to a halt. I was Political Director of DSA from '96-'99, and based on that experience, I can say there just wasn't enough money to begin with, and we weren't able to raise much more. I've remained a vice-chair of DSA since then, but it serves as a name on the letterhead. In the last eight or nine years, that's been my involvement.

Cohen: What made you come back after departing?

Riddiough: Partly, I thought Michael was somebody who had energy and good ideas that could take DSA in a new direction. I think he did a terrific job while he was there, but it's the kind of thing that you can only do for so long, and we weren't able to build on it after he left. It may have run its course, so it still exists, but as a shadow of its former self, if you will.

Cohen: How do you feel today about the history of socialist-feminism in the U.S.?

Riddiough: Looking over the last 40 years—this year was my 40th college reunion; I graduated in '68—I can say the changes that have occurred, in some ways, are fairly incredible. When I started college, newspapers still had ads reading "Help Wanted: Female." There certainly weren't any openly gay members of Congress. There are a lot of those things that have changed. While we haven't achieved what we wanted to, we've made some strides.

But I think direction of American politics in the last 25 years or so has been pretty devastating. What used to be the center is now viewed as the ultra-Left. When you look at the political spectrum, what's gone on is fairly incredible. Potentially, some of that might change over the next few years, partly because of this economic crisis; there's a sense the whole "get government off your back" philosophy hasn't worked out as well as it should have, so there may be more openness towards rethinking the economic structure here. But I'm the original Pollyanna; I think things look much better, and I am more hopeful about Obama than, say, Clinton, because he does have background as a community organizer. You sense, in listening to him talk, he understands that it's not just him, that there is a need for people to be involved. His advisors probably aren't very different from Clinton's, but I think there is hope that maybe things could move in a better direction.

But it depends on people being involved beyond the election. There must be an ongoing commitment to organizing, to community involvement. If that does happen, then I think there's a chance of rebuilding a real Left in the United States. Without that, things look pretty bleak.

I remember conversations with people where we would talk about what U.S. life would be like after the revolution, and we meant it. There was a sense that things really could change and the way they could change was by our action. I haven't had that sense for probably the last 20 years.


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