Interview with Joanne Barkan

Victor Cohen

Joanne Barkan came to the New American Movement (NAM) after spending several years abroad and writing about Italian politics for the U.S. Left. Her perspective on NAM is informed by her experiences with the broader mass political movements in Italy and her personal connections to the *Il Manifesto* editorial collective. In 1976, Barkan became an at-large member of NAM in Connecticut where she worked with a group of unaffiliated leftists on community organizing projects. She did speaking and writing for NAM about the Italian Left while pursuing a career as an editor for a publishing company. Barkan later moved to New York City where she joined the local NAM chapter and continued her career as a writer, editor, and activist. Although initially opposed to the merger of NAM and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), Barkan became an advocate for the formation of a merged organization and was one of several in her NAM chapter to join the newly formed Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). As a member of DSA, she served for almost a decade in its national leadership and, during this time, also began her tenure on the editorial board of *Dissent* magazine.

Today she continues her work as a political essayist and as member of the editorial board of *Dissent*. She is also the author of *Visions of Emancipation: The Italian Workers' Movement Since 1945* (Praeger 1984, 1986), and she has written over 120 books—in verse and prose—for young readers.

This interview was conducted by Victor Cohen via phone on June 17, 2009.

Victor Cohen: How did you gravitate towards the New American Movement?

Joanne Barkan: I was living in Italy in the summer of 1975 and saw a small notice in *Il Manifesto* (the newspaper I read every day) about a socialist-feminist conference that had taken place in the United States, in Ohio. That intrigued me. I had been in Italy for a while and had no idea there were socialist-feminists in the United States, or that they were meeting. When I got back to the States in the fall, I stopped in New York for a few days and went to see Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff at *Monthly Review*— knew them and had written for the magazine—to find out what was happening on the Left. I asked what they knew about this socialist-feminist conference. They told me to get in touch with Barbara Ehrenreich because she had been there.

Barbara was coming into the city for a meeting of a support group for women and children in Chile where the post-coup repression was severe. After the meeting, we went out for coffee. She told me about the conference and also about a political organization that she belonged to called the New American Movement and gave me some of their literature. When I read the material, it appealed to me. On paper it looked perfect—democratic, socialist, and what seemed to me at that point adequately critical of the "already existing socialisms" (the Soviet bloc countries and allies). I also felt there was a real commitment to feminism—they had a rule that at least 50 percent of the leadership had to be women. That makes a huge difference in what an organization will be like. The commitment also came through in the way NAM called itself a socialist-feminist organization, not just a democratic-socialist organization.

Shortly after I read the material, I joined. I was working as an editor at a small division of Prentice Hall in Waterford, Connecticut and living in New London, Connecticut. I wanted to do political organizing. Since there was no one else in NAM anywhere nearby (the closest chapter was in Providence), I became an at-large member. At-large members were full members and paid full dues, which were a percentage of the member's income. It wasn't like joining DSOC or subscribing to a magazine—I had to pay what then seemed like a substantial amount of money for a low-income editor.

Cohen: Could we backtrack for a second? How did you end up in Italy reading *Il Manifesto* every day?

Barkan: I did my undergraduate and graduate work in French literature, and after I got my MA, I was at Johns Hopkins working on my PhD and married a graduate student in the Italian section of the Romance Language Department. We started spending entire summers in Italy, and then he got a fellowship, so we stayed for a year and a half. I learned Italian and began to write about Italian politics with a focus on the Left for American publications. I kept going back to Italy after we separated and began writing about the United States for *Il Manifesto*. I went back as often as I could, visited friends, did interviews, and went to editorial meetings at the *Il Manifesto* offices in Rome.

Cohen: Were you already on the Left when you went to Italy the first time?

Barkan: Yes. In high school, my inclinations were liberal, but I didn't become passionate about politics until shortly before I went to college. As the war in Vietnam expanded, I became antiwar. By the time I was living in Paris during my junior year in 1966-1967, I began to identify more explicitly with the Left. But I was in Paris; I couldn't join SDS or get involved organizationally. Aside from antiwar demonstrations, I wasn't an activist.

Cohen: But when you ended up in Italy, was reading *Il Manifesto* on a daily basis an indication of your politics?

Barkan: Definitely. I was never a doctrinaire Marxist, but I certainly used a Marxist analysis to understand the world at that point. My politics were New Left in the Italian context, and that put me to the Left of the Italian Communist Party, which I considered social democratic and not revolutionary. At that stage of my life, I thought there had to be a socialist revolution. I couldn't conceive of how it would be peaceful. I wasn't advocating gun practice or making bombs; I wasn't inclined to violence, but it didn't seem to me that this was going to be an easy project.

Cohen: You weren't ever attracted to any of the Marxist-Leninist organizations?

Barkan: No. I couldn't stand the authoritarianism, and I couldn't stand having a "political line" that you had to follow. And the lines were absurdly rigid. I had a bizarre experience with this shortly after I came back to the States. I was asked to speak on a panel on Europe at a weekend conference in Manhattan sponsored by four warring groups—the Progressive Labor Party, the Revolutionary Communist Party, a Maoist group, and another Leninist group. A couple of thousand people came. The premise of the conference was that these groups represented four different choices for a position on global politics. One position held that the United States was the greatest evil on earth, another had the United States and the Soviet Union as equally evil, another had Maoist China as the greatest evil, and there was the fourth position that I can't recall. I gave an informational talk on the Left in Italy and the Italian Communist Party. When I finished, people stood up and started screaming, "Which position are you taking?" That was my experience of Leninist organizations.

Cohen: The *Il Manifesto* group and PdUP [Party of Proletarian Unity for Communism] must have represented a very different kind of radical politics. How did you find interacting with them when you were in Italy?

Barkan: At the time, I identified with them politically and thought that they were the smartest people on the Italian Left. Reading *Il Manifesto* everyday was like reading a journal everyday; it was a tremendous political education. I was friendly with people in PdUP when I was living in Florence. The Left had a huge victory in the 1975 regional, provincial, and city elections. The Communist Party received over 33 percent of the vote nationally. A lot of cities, provinces, and regions went "red," meaning that Left coalitions governed. It was extraordinary to be there at the time. It was the high point of the Left's strength in Italy. A militant labor movement and vibrant Left had achieved substantial weight electorally; the New Left alone sustained three daily newspapers.

Cohen: When you were back in the States, how did NAM look in the context of your experience with Italian New Left politics?

Barkan: NAM looked attractive to me because the people there followed what was happening in Europe and, in particular, the Ital-

ian Left. They knew what *Il Manifesto* was, they knew what the Italian Communist Party was, and they were interested in the phenomenon of Eurocommunism—perhaps because one of NAM's national leaders, Richard Healey, was particularly interested in it. All the study groups read Gramsci, and terms like "war of position" and "war of movement" were touchstones. Compared to most of the Left in the United States, which really knew nothing about Europe and less about Italy, NAM felt like the place to be.

Cohen: What did you do as a NAM member in New London?

Barkan: New London was located in a very Republican area with a large blue-collar working class at the Electric Boat Company where nuclear submarines were made. I got in touch with the leftists I knew in the area and asked them for the names of any leftists they knew, and we started an organization called the New London Organizing Collective. The members were in their twenties and thirties and interested in doing community organizing. The group existed for the two years that I lived there and then gradually disbanded.

Cohen: How would you characterize the New London group? Or maybe a better way to ask that would be, what was it like being a NAM member in a non-NAM organization?

Barkan: Here's an anecdote that might answer your question. Nick Rabkin, who was a NAM organizer, was touring the country, holding meetings with interested people, and getting them to set up locals. He spoke to the New London Organizing Collective, and the reaction people had was, "If I were going to join a national organization, I'd probably join yours. But why do I need to belong to a national organization?" It was typical of the time. People had "gone local"—the idea was to work in your local community and build from the grassroots up. Many people were interested in [Saul] Alinsky's model of community organizing and didn't see the necessity for a national organization. Even though the local organizing model NAM used was the same as Alinsky's, NAM believed the Left needed a national organization. But that wasn't true for the group of people that I was working with.

Cohen: Did that mean the people you worked with rejected socialism, or socialist-feminism, as a goal?

Barkan: No. They all considered themselves radicals; many of them called themselves socialists, but they weren't very ideological. The group was very anticapitalist and socialist in a "gut-level" way. Half of the members were professors at Connecticut College and had read their Marx and Gramsci; they were educated in Left theory. One of them belonged to the Union for Radical Political Economists. But they wanted to work locally.

Cohen: What do you make of that?

Barkan: This was in 1976, after the New Left had imploded and after many people were burned out by the effort to stop the Vietnam War. I think "work locally" was the dominant trend. People were running food co-ops, organizing around rent control, setting up neighborhood health clinics and women's shelters. And that's exactly what we did: we ran a food co-op, and we had a campaign for a Fair Rent Commission, and when federal money became available through Great Society programs, we got involved in town meetings where people discussed how to use the money. Many radicals were disaffected with national politics and didn't see how they could have much impact there. Also, the socio-economic composition of our group was such that there wasn't one union member, so we were distant from the labor movement. The hierarchy of the labor movement had supported the Vietnam War and was very hostile to the Left. The people in our group, myself included, thought of the labor movement as politically rightwing.

Cohen: Did NAM seem to be a part of that larger movement that sought to redefine left politics in the same spirit as *Il Manifesto* or PdUP? Or did you see it more as a product of a group of people who had made it through the 1960s in the U.S. and were feeling their way forward into a new mode of political practice and theory and, as part of that, were keeping an eye out towards developments elsewhere?

Barkan: The latter. I was very aware that Europe at that time, especially Italy, was fundamentally different from the United States, and I appreciated the fact that the New American Movement was founded with the idea of building an organization that was appropriate for the United States. Even the choice of name was part of the effort, and I found that appealing. The Leninist organizations used language that came from elsewhere and other times and sounded that way. I felt that socialists should belong to a socialist organization, and NAM definitely looked like the best one. But I never thought that I had found the equivalent of PdUP in the United States.

Cohen: Why didn't NAM seem the equivalent of *Il Manifesto*?

Barkan: It's more a question of history and politics than program or ideology. *Il Manifesto* came out of the left wing of the Italian Communist Party [PCI] as a group that had become more and more disgruntled with what it saw as the social democratic stance of the party. *Il Manifesto* was interested in revolution, in a commitment to ending capitalism. The Italian Communist Party equivocated on the issue of capitalism for a variety of reasons. The party participated in electoral politics and needed to win over more moderate voters, and there was also tremendous pressure from the United States, and from the United States through Germany, to keep a lid on radicalism in the communist movement in Italy. So when some PCI intellectuals began to publish a journal called *Il Manifesto*, they were accused of forming a faction and got kicked out. Then they decided to transform the journal into a daily newspaper, also called *Il Manifesto*. This was

completely different from NAM's origins. In addition, unlike NAM, *Il Manifesto* didn't start as a membership and activist organization. They set up *Il Manifesto* discussion groups around the country, but it was primarily a newspaper.

In 1974, during the time I was living in Italy, *Il Manifesto* and remnants of the Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity [PSIUP] merged, even though they were from different traditions. PSIUP had come out of the left wing of the Italian Socialist Party. There were tremendous tensions there, but they did form a new party, PdUP, and *Il Manifesto* became the party's newspaper. It lasted about three years. Then they split apart again, and *Il Manifesto* became an independent newspaper and remained independent.

Cohen: What do you make of the merger, then, between NAM and DSOC, and do you compare that with the merger you just mentioned? There seems to be more than a passing consonance between the two.

Barkan: There might be a few very superficial points of comparison: NAM's members included a group of older people who had come out of the Communist Party, and DSOC, like the Italian Socialist Party, was in the Socialist International. But other than that, there were no similarities whatsoever. Although the New American Movement was such an anomalous organization. Although there was a tremendous amount of respect in NAM for these older, former communists, the respect was for the battles they had fought in the 1930s, their experience as organizers, and their experience in the labor movement. But there was nothing about the New American Movement that resembled a party. And we always said just that: "We are *not* a party. We're trying to build a political movement." So the two situations were completely different.

Cohen: Just to press on that comparison, though—it is striking that both situations speak to a similar desire to imagine a new radical movement made up of what used to be very antagonistic forces in the world of left politics. Would you say that both mergers have a resonance with the larger transition socialism was going through in the 1970s?

Barkan: You've brought up two notions. One is organizational and one is ideological. The parties in Italy were what was called "mass parties" as opposed to "catch-all parties"–terms that are used in political science. The Democratic Party is a catch-all party: it's primarily an electoral vehicle and gathers voters from across a large spectrum. A mass party, on the other hand, is a party that represents a movement; it has a large, more active membership and a more clearly defined political line. This was typical of Italian parties. The Italian Communist Party was the party of a political movement and a large part of the labor movement. But the Socialist Party also had roots in a movement that included part of the labor movement. The Christian Democratic Party, too, represented a movement—the social Catholic movement. The Italian New Left was a movement, and it

also had parties. So movements and parties overlapped. There wasn't an equivalent in the United States. On the one hand, the New American Movement didn't participate in elections and wasn't a political party; on the other hand, the Democratic Party wasn't a movement.

But when you speak about the desire to create a new model for a socialist revolution, a "third way" that was neither Leninism nor social democracy, you're referring to a European phenomenon. It was not just an Italian phenomenon and certainly not just PdUP or *Il Manifesto*. The "granddaddy" of third-way parties was the Italian Communist Party itself, and the "third way" was defined as not Leninist, not in favor of armed revolution, but not social democratic in its classic form. From the point of view of Italy's New Left, the PCI didn't succeed in creating anything different. The Italian New Left—at least *Il Manifesto* and PdUP—still wanted to find a third way. Around 1973 or 1974, Il Manifesto proposed what they called "the council road to socialism" because they believed that the key to building a revolutionary movement was workers' councils in factories and other workplaces; this was a way of building from the bottom up within the working class and would lead, they argued, to workers actually running individual plants and then the economy so that they would structurally change the system; it would no longer be a capitalist economy.

I was obsessed with the third way. That's one of the reasons I was so interested in *Il Manifesto* and PdUP, and why I kept going back to Italy and writing about it a lot. I was trying to find out what this third way might be and how it could work in the American context. I don't think that NAM considered itself a third way. There was an absolute rejection of the antidemocratic quality of the Leninist parties; there was no interest in the Democratic Party because it had been involved in the Vietnam War and practiced a liberalism that was too weak to change people's lives significantly for the better. Although NAM's conception of the transformation of society was from the bottom up, the whole project was at a much greater distance from anything that you would call a revolution; American society was so much more distant from a Left political project than Italian society was. The options in the United States were completely different.

Cohen: That must have made organizing for NAM a very complicated process.

Barkan: Yes, because you were doing two things. First, on the basis of local organizing, you were trying to build a movement that would draw in people because they could actually solve real problems on the ground; this included supporting left candidates if there were any running for office in your locale. Second, you were trying to convert people to socialism, which was considered mostly an educational project. A NAM local typically would have organizing projects and also run a socialist school, or it would have organizing projects and also put on panels and lectures. It wasn't a strange model; we did exactly the same thing in the New London Organizing Collective.

Cohen: So you'd have education as well as community organizing?

Barkan: Right. The difference was that our education program in New London wasn't explicitly socialist, whereas in NAM it was. The NAM schools were usually called socialist schools.

Cohen: When you went to your first NAM convention in 1976, which was also the high point of the Italian Left, it must have felt very rewarding to have found NAM in the U.S.

Barkan: It was rewarding since there was so much interest in what was happening on the Italian Left. I spoke at a panel whose topic was something like, "Should we be supporting the Italian Communist Party or the New Left in Italy?" The general attitude in NAM was, "They both look great compared to what we have here." It was one of those silly New Left things—you had to decide which party you were going to support in a foreign country, as if it made any difference. But there was interest in more than the political parties in Italy. The labor movement was remarkably militant at that point. National labor leaders would talk about Gramsci at rallies. It was very gratifying that there were people in NAM who were interested in it all.

Cohen: Did NAM in 1976 seem like it could go somewhere?

Barkan: For me, NAM was a way of being in touch with other people who were interested in socialist theory and who followed international politics, especially European politics, closely. My main enthusiasm for NAM was for the intellectual, political camaraderie. When I moved to New York in 1978, I became a member of the NAM local there and continued to do writing and speaking for the organization. I spoke at every national convention on one panel or another. But talk about the merger with DSOC began in 1979, so I was in New York for just a year before the possible merger became my focus. I continued to write, I continued to speak, but I was on the negotiating committee for two years. The New York City NAM local opposed the merger, and when it finally happened, only a few people from the local stayed in the merged organization.

Cohen: Why were people so opposed to the merger in your local?

Barkan: It was an ideological division; it wasn't a division in terms of what people were doing on the ground. People in DSOC were doing exactly the same kind of local organizing as people in NAM, and in some cases, before the national merger, there were local mergers because people were doing the same work.

Two points of difference were the labor movement and the Democratic Party. NAM claimed to be a rank-and-file organization, and opponents of the merger argued that DSOC members were part of the "labor movement bureaucracy." In fact, the people who were labor activists in both organizations weren't rank-and-file workers for the most part; they were often organizers working for the unions. But there was a presumed difference, at least in NAM. The other dif-

ference was the decision to work within the Democratic Party or to work for third party candidates, which was usually called "independent political action." In 1979, most NAM members wanted nothing to do with the Democratic Party. It's still a division on the Left today although the third-party builders are a smaller minority.

Cohen: New York was probably unique because it had DSOC's headquarters and an active NAM chapter.

Barkan: The New York City DSOC chapter was the strongest in DSOC because it was where the national headquarters were. NAM's New York local was always weak.

Cohen: Where did you stand on the question of the merger?

Barkan: I opposed it at first. I spoke against the merger at the 1979 convention and was put on the merger committee as the person who was opposed to it. There were people in NAM who were really angry because I came around to supporting the merger during the first year of negotiations when I was supposed to be representing the other side. But after a few months, the merger looked necessary to me. One argument seemed absolutely crucial: NAM was no longer growing, and most of the new members were "associate members." They paid fifteen dollars and got the publications—that was it. For NAM that meant the financial basis for running the organization just wasn't there anymore. Also it was less and less an activist organization. In NAM the associate members were called, derisively, "paper members," and DSOC was considered to be largely an organization of paper members—although they certainly had as many activists as we did because DSOC was a much larger organization overall. I didn't meet local DSOC activists until I was on the merger committee, and once I got to know them, they seemed very much like NAM activists. Aside from the issue of the Democratic Party, there really weren't substantial political differences.

Cohen: Why do you think people weren't as willing or interested in joining NAM as full members by this time?

Barkan: If you were going to be an active local member, it took a lot of time and energy and a tremendous commitment. You were trying to build the organization and do community organizing, and you had to support yourself doing something else as well. People burned out or they lost interest or they became very committed to the organizing they were doing and were less willing to put time into NAM. A lot of people went into labor organizing and became absorbed by that.

Cohen: When you would report to the folks at *Il Manifesto* about what was going on in the United States, what did they think of NAM or things like this?

Barkan: They weren't terribly interested in following the American Left. From their point of view, the American Left was very tiny and

not politically relevant. They were interested in political analysis but political analysis of what was happening with the Democrats. They were very much interested in the American economy and American social movements such as the feminist, labor, and environmental movements, but they really weren't interested in Left organizations.

A friend of mine from *Il Manifesto* came to live in the United States for a while and went to a NAM regional conference in New Haven with me. He was a fabulous young journalist and wrote a long, lively article for *Il Manifesto* about the conference. He found it fun and very American with small group discussions, local members—including a lot of women—speaking rather than just listening to party leaders, and singing at the end. It probably seemed more like summer camp to him than what he was used to.

Cohen: After the merger, did you stay involved with the new organization, the Democratic Socialists of America [DSA]?

Barkan: Yes. I was in the national leadership through 1991 or 1992. I was on both the National Executive Committee and the National Interim Committee. If I remember correctly, the National Executive Committee met a few times a year, and the National Interim Committee met every two or three weeks. I did writing and a lot of speaking, but I wasn't involved in organizing projects.

Cohen: When you were doing that, did it feel like a viable project?

Barkan: Less and less so as the years went by. I was elected to the *Dissent* magazine editorial board in 1986 and became close friends with Irving Howe. He would give me long lectures on why I had to stay on the National Executive Committee, but we were both very aware that the organization was getting steadily weaker, especially after Michael Harrington died. It was exactly the same thing that had happened to NAM: there were fewer and fewer activists, and fewer and fewer people who were willing to put time into the organization itself. There were some people who found that being known as a socialist was an impediment to their organizing, so they had to keep their DSA work separate from their organizing work, and that became too burdensome.

Irving was very committed to the necessity of having some kind of nationwide socialist organization. He felt very strongly about the socialist ideal, that one couldn't give up on it. Having the organization was part of that. I would say that DSOC's decline began just a few years after the merger, slowly at first. I asked both Irving and Michael Harrington, separately, if they thought DSA's getting weaker was due to the merger. They both said that it would have happened anyway.

Cohen: So the same phenomenon was happening in DSOC as NAM, and the merger didn't do anything for DSOC either?

Barkan: DSOC was still at its peak when the merger took place while NAM was already beginning to suffer. NAM's decline began earlier, and I think it began because it required such strong commit-

ment to maintain the organization. I think DSA's decline had more to do with the difficulties of the Left, the rise of the Reagan Right, the difficulties of the Democratic Party, and the difficulties of the labor movement.

Cohen: In retrospect, do you think the merger made sense?

Barkan: [Long pause.] If there had been no merger, I think that NAM might have continued for a number of years, but I think it would have been much smaller, and I don't think it could have sustained a national staff. I don't remember what proportion of NAM members quit when the merger took place, but some of them formed another organization. I don't know how many locals they managed to sustain or exactly what they did, but NAM might have looked like that organization if there hadn't been a merger. The 1980s were horrible for the Left, and so they were extremely difficult for the merged organization and would have been equally difficult for NAM.