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*Rejection in the Revolution:
Leninist Theory and the Weather Underground (1969-1974)*

ABSTRACT: While U.S. domestic comfort was booming at a time of international turmoil, the militant Weathermen (or Weather Underground Organization) of the late 1960s and 1970s sought to “bring the war home” by employing the theories of small-nation revolutionaries like Ho Chi Minh and Fidel Castro. Their fervor to support contemporary international movements meant ignoring the theories and methods most applicable to their goals – those of Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet Union. The author argues that, in this New-Left rejection of imperialism, Lenin’s works were undervalued when needed the most, and that a manipulated legacy at the hands of Lenin’s successors led to Weather’s failure.

KEYWORDS: modern history; U.S.; Weathermen (Weather Underground Organization); imperialism; transnationalism; terrorism; New Left; Vladimir Lenin; Ho Chi Minh; Fidel Castro

Introduction

“It is the oppressed peoples of the world who have created the wealth of this empire, and it is to them that it belongs.”¹ Bernardine Dohrn wrote these words, reminiscent of the late Vladimir Lenin, in 1969 as a declaration of revolution in and against the United States. The idea of the *Weather Underground Organization* (or *Weathermen*) was to lead a worldwide communist revolution to fight the imperialistic tendencies of the United States both abroad and at home. Organization of the working class, militant support for the Black Power movement, and enlightening the average American to wartime atrocities in Vietnam were all on their revolutionary agenda.² The U.S. Capitol and the Pentagon were bombed, and Dohrn spent three years on the “FBI’s Most Wanted” list.³ However, within five years, *Weather* seemed a distant memory as they all lived underground, undercover lives to avoid arrest and did little else.⁴ What could possibly have driven this group to quiet obscurity? There are a number of explanations involving government agencies like the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), but politically violent and terrorist organizations rarely collapse due to counter-terrorism efforts.⁵ Rather, ideological and tactical mistakes

¹ Bernardine Dohrn, “You Don’t Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows,” in *Sing a Battle Song: The Revolutionary Poetry, Statements, and Communiqués of the Weather Underground, 1970-1974*, ed. Bernardine Dohrn, Bill Ayers, and Jeff Jones (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 67-70, here 67.

² Dohrn, “You Don’t Need a Weatherman,” 67.

³ Ron Jacobs, *The Way the Wind Blew: A History of the Weather Underground* (New York: Verso, 1997), 7.

⁴ Mark Rudd, *Underground: My Life with SDS and the Weathermen* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 204.

⁵ Jacobs, *Way the Wind Blew*, 161; Richard English, *Does Terrorism Work? A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 29.

within the groups themselves most often spell their downfall. In *Weather's* case, these young idealists followed revolutionary examples ill-fitted to their circumstances, only correcting their error after leading the movement down an irreparably misguided path. The 26th of July Movement in Cuba and the Vietnamese National Liberation Front did not suit the circumstances of privileged educated youths, yet they were the model for most of the *Weather* movement.⁶

The romantic attitude most Western insurgents had toward Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh was unsustainable once put into practice. *Weather* in particular sought to distance themselves from any Soviet connection and therefore emphasized smaller, less internationally powerful revolutions and revolutionaries. However, their fight was against the most militarily advanced and domestically comfortable nation during the Cold War. Not only did they realize too late that a careful study of Lenin's theory would have offered the best possible parallel to their situation, but they misconstrued and underutilized those of Lenin's works they did use initially – as recognized by Dohrn herself.⁷ From the perspective of scholarly revolutionary theory, domestic and global circumstances, and ideological motivation, Lenin should have been the most accessible example to *Weather*. However, trends in the overarching New-Left movement, insecurities over wealth and national status, and a disillusionment with the Soviet Union led *Weather* away from tactics that would have benefitted them. This article argues that early failures in applying contemporary ideologies encouraged *Weather* leadership to embrace Leninist theory on privilege and revolutionary cycles to find a more effective role for themselves in their proposed revolution. By including analysis of both *Weather's* direct and indirect ties to Leninism, especially in publications and practice, this study aims to contextualize New-Left terrorism as part of a larger twentieth-century narrative.⁸

To discuss the troubled relationship between *Weather* and Lenin, one must first understand Lenin's own interpretation and implementation of Marxist theory. Lenin's interpretation provided a way, at least theoretically, for educated, middle to upper-class people to establish themselves as twentieth-century revolutionaries. This study then proceeds to an exploration of why *Weather* was more inclined to

⁶ Rudd, *Underground*, 165.

⁷ Bernardine Dohrn, "The Weather Eye: Communiqués from the Weather Underground," in *Sing a Battle Song: The Revolutionary Poetry, Statements, and Communiqués of the Weather Underground, 1970-1974*, ed. Bernardine Dohrn, Bill Ayers, and Jeff Jones (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 131-230, here 135; Christopher Phelps, "The New Left Wasn't So New," *Dissent* 60, no. 4 (2013): 85-91, here 86.

⁸ The term "terrorism" used in this study follows the 2004 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1566 definition as being "criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act."

ill-fitting revolutionary examples in its formative years and only later turned to Lenin. To develop context for *Weather's* beginnings, a review of scholarship on revolutionary theory and terrorism is necessary: from David Rapoport's and Tom Parker's wave and strain theories of terrorism to Richard English's terrorist profiling, these frameworks provide a deeper background to *Weather's* missteps.⁹ This article offers a comparison between the early and later writings of *Weather* to show an increased presence of Leninist thought as time progressed.

I. The Complexities of Lenin

Lenin's work on Marxism is exemplary of a recurring revolutionary conundrum. How can Marxism be practical when it is the bourgeoisie that is prepared for the revolution rather than the proletariat? Marx and Engels themselves belonged to the educated class that led the great majority of revolutions and attempted revolutions both before and after their publications.¹⁰ The son of an educated superintendent and teacher, Lenin was not only university-trained but pursued an advanced degree in law.¹¹ He clearly was an established member of the class he condemned. Lenin himself struggled with how to define his relationship to the revolution, as can be seen in a number of his works.¹² Lenin's early defining work, *What Is to Be Done?* (1902), outlines his plan to incorporate all sectors of society to bring about a revolution. Lenin blames class prejudice and imperialism for keeping the working class unaware of revolutionary benefits.¹³ Because the effects of imperialism did not burden "enlightened" upper classes, they could use education to understand such benefits.¹⁴ If those whom the revolution would serve the most were unaware and unorganized, it was therefore up to Lenin and the educated to provide the catalyst for revolutionary change. Once this catalyst succeeded, it would be the role of the bourgeois to abandon their class privilege and education to become part of the proletariat. That is not to say, however, that Lenin condemned intellectualism in the revolution. On the contrary, as this article

⁹ English, *Does Terrorism Work*; Tom Parker and Nick Sitter, "The Four Horsemen of Terrorism: It's Not Waves, It's Strains," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28, no. 2 (2016): 197-216.

¹⁰ For example, the American Revolution, the French Revolution(s), the Irish Revolutionary War, etc. See Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Jonathan Israel, *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775-1848: The Expanding Blaze* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); and Jérôme aan de Wiel, "The Shots That Reverberated for a Long Time, 1916-1932: The Irish Revolution, the Bolsheviks, and the European Left," *International History Review* 42, no. 1 (2020): 195-213.

¹¹ R. D. Rucker, "The Making of the Russian Revolution: Revolutionaries, Workers, and the Marxian Theory of Revolution" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1981), 23.

¹² Vladimir I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?* In Vladimir I. Lenin, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), first published in 1902, is the most prominent example.

¹³ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 50.

¹⁴ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 46.

shows, nearly all of his works laud the use of all skills and privileges possible to move the revolution forward.¹⁵

However, Lenin did change his tune over time, which has proven problematic in later interpretations and the use of his works. New-Left scholar Christopher Phelps notes that Lenin's later views favored a form of delegation where each class had its own role to play rather than one educating another.¹⁶ Lenin quickly began to think that allowing the working class to take on his theories left room for misinterpretation and unsuccessful implementation.¹⁷ Essentially, while Lenin believed in a more equal standard of living for all, he emphasized that the educated classes should not shirk intellectualism because a completely uneducated "dictatorship of the proletariat" would crumble.¹⁸ Historian Donald Davis notes that Lenin's change grew out of his own self-education, namely, in recognizing that no one sector of society could understand how to perfect every aspect of the revolution.¹⁹ Lenin understood political aspects and goals best and framed his view of the revolution accordingly. However, he grew to recognize that politics is only one aspect of creating a successful revolution. Rather than enlighten the working class to what the intelligentsia and politicians were theorizing about revolution, it was better to delegate different tactics to different participants. This change in ideology appears to have been largely ignored in the revolutionary and terrorist movements of the later twentieth century – even among those who claim Leninist or socialist inspiration.²⁰

Particularly important to an analysis of *Weather* is Lenin's own discussion of terrorism in *What Is to Be Done*. Lenin's interpretation is multilayered and far more complicated than appears in *Weather's* manifesto. While he recognizes that terrorist tactics play an important role in the development of revolutionary "consciousness," he includes some important qualifiers. Arguably the most important of these qualifiers is his emphasis on an "all-sided political agitation."²¹ Rather than totally reject the political sphere, Lenin calls for the infiltration of the

¹⁵ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 51. *What Is to Be Done* mainly differs from Lenin's later works in its description of the role of different classes after the revolution.

¹⁶ Christopher Phelps, "Lenin and American Radicalism," *Science & Society* 60, no. 1 (1996): 80-86.

¹⁷ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 40.

¹⁸ Donald Edward Davis, "Lenin's Theory of War" (PhD. Diss., Indiana University, 1969), 4. For Lenin's theoretical shift over time, see Antonio Negri, *Factory of Strategy: Thirty-Three Lessons on Lenin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Davis, "Lenin's Theory of War," 10.

²⁰ English, *Does Terrorism Work*, 82. Terrorists throughout history have remained notably absent in the political sphere, with abstentionism becoming the popular global trend for revolutionaries. Theoretically, if they reject the government as illegitimate, participating would be counterproductive to their movement. For abstentionism, see Matt Treacy, *The IRA 1956-69: Rethinking the Republic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

²¹ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 75.

government on several fronts. He states that terrorists have the potential to catalyze intellectual responsibilities of the revolution—but only in tandem with the working class’s economic struggle and political action. By this definition, students would easily fit the profile for Lenin’s ideal terrorists if they supported and created a larger political and economic movement. Lenin notes that terrorists too often attempt to act while “[lacking] plans for a broader organization of revolutionary work,” thus leading them to repeat mistakes and alienate possible allies.²² Lenin even notes that, when there is a democratic system in place, it is particularly important to utilize a multi-faceted approach to avoid alienating those who believe in working through the system.²³ By merely utilizing terrorism in a system especially designed for participation, a group completely alienates possible sympathetic peoples and groups.

Another qualifier Lenin addresses is that, in terms of an “all-sided” approach, terrorism must have a goal beyond merely inspiring the working class. Lenin warns that terrorists, as well as the intelligentsia, tend to underestimate the revolutionary sensibilities of the working class.²⁴ Therefore, if a terrorist organization’s entire goal is to call the working class to action, then the revolution will not progress. Lenin recalls the legacy of the Russian anarchist terrorists, labelling their attempt at revolution “simplistic” because they lacked a larger, multi-level “plan of tactics” for their movement.²⁵ They had, from Lenin’s perspective, both a lack of practical knowledge and an incomplete ideology.²⁶ Meanwhile, according to Lenin, terrorists needed a strong understanding both of their own role as well as how they fit into the larger movement. They could not act completely independently, otherwise their actions could open up opportunities for unrelated movements to latch on to their work. Furthermore, they could not act independently because a purely violent, provocative movement like terrorism offers no complex and sustainable system.

II. Theoretical Interpretations of Weather

Weather’s significance in the larger narrative of the twentieth century resides in its role in terrorist and revolutionary theory.²⁷ To understand this significance, a brief discussion of scholarship on terrorism is necessary. On the basis of reactions and wave theories, a clearer picture emerges why exactly *Weather* was, at first, inclined to ignore true Leninism and only later understood its benefits for their specific cause.

²² Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 49.

²³ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 63.

²⁴ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 75.

²⁵ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 49.

²⁶ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 34.

²⁷ English himself lectured in 2018 at Queen’s University, Belfast, on the importance of a twentieth-century timeline of terrorism, with nearly every group coinciding with multiple other revolutions and ideologies, often creating and inspiring more terrorism.

One of the most widely accepted methods of viewing terrorism in the twentieth century involves the theory of historical cycles. Both David Rapoport's "Four Waves of Terrorism" (2004) and Arthur Schlesinger's *Cycles of American History* (1986) develop the idea that *Weather* and its contemporaries are part of a larger narrative of twentieth-century patterns. While Rapoport's proposed first-wave 1880s terrorists predate Lenin's movement, it is important to acknowledge their impact on Lenin's most formative years and the development of his own terrorist theory.²⁸ Drawing on Tom Parker's and Nick Sitter's 2016 critique of Rapoport's wave theory, this analysis links Lenin's movement to the supposed first wave of anarchy through "strains" that influenced changing political participation.²⁹ The first wave of anarchist terrorists aided in bringing about radical socialism in Russia and in developing new tactics for revolutionary change. Most importantly for this study, Rapoport emphasizes the similarities between the third wave, 1970s New-Left terrorism, and first-wave, late-nineteenth century anarchism.³⁰ The goal of the first and third waves was internal terrorism where groups attacked domestically to impact international policy. Meanwhile, second-wave, 1940s and 1950s anti-imperialist terrorism was largely external with countries like Vietnam, Algeria, and Cuba fighting for self-determination from colonial or puppet governments.³¹

Arthur Schlesinger's theoretical work specifically facilitates an understanding of trends in American history. Schlesinger discusses a political pendulum that may explain *Weather's* inclination to ally themselves with more vibrant movements of their time. He focuses on New-Left intellectuals, particularly historians within the movement, who condemned earlier American liberals and leftists who had hoped to abandon such political ideologies.³² If even the most professional of the movement denigrate the American leftist tradition, those they educate are likely to follow suit. Schlesinger's basic argument is that each piece of American history is a reaction to a previous one, forming ideological cycles.³³ In this way, the New Left reacted against the stalwart, American communist Old Left to become far more active and militant. If every American movement is a reaction, then an ideological back-and-forth connects alternating movements. Therefore, the New

²⁸ David Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism," in *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of Grand Strategy*, ed. Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 46-73.

²⁹ Parker and Sitter, "Four Horsemen of Terrorism," 200. For the classification and development of terrorism, see *Terrorism in Context*, ed. Martha Crenshaw (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

³⁰ Rapoport, "Four Waves of Modern Terrorism," 47.

³¹ Rapoport, "Four Waves of Modern Terrorism," 50. For wave theory as it pertains to the U.S., see Jerald B. Brown, "The Wave Theory of American Social Movements," *City & Society* 6, no. 1 (1992): 26-45. Alternatively, see Parker and Sitter, "Four Horsemen of Terrorism," 197-216.

³² Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), 72.

³³ Schlesinger, *Cycles of American History*, 45.

Left would be more inclined to act similarly to the anarchist movement prior to the nonviolent Old Left. In confirmation, Dohrn notes in *Weather's* reflective work *Prairie Fire*, "we inherited a deadening ideology of conformity and gradualism."³⁴ This gradualism could not carry over to the restless generation that followed.

Schlesinger also notes that similar political priorities influence such reactions.³⁵ Imperialism happened to be a common thread connecting the New Left and early anarchists. Additionally, *Weather* and a number of organizations ranging from the *Irish Republican Army* to the *Palestinian Liberation Organization* stated that this Old-Left attitude allowed for an increase in imperialism even in supposedly socialist states like the Soviet Union.³⁶ Thus, small-scale revolutionaries fighting against Cold-War dynamics, like second-wave Castro and Ho, became the vanguard of these movements. Rather than look to their cyclical predecessors in those before the Old-Left, nonviolent, labor-focused movements, *Weather* took their guidance from second-wave revolutionaries. Similar to Rapoport's wave theory, the third wave reacted against the nonviolent attitude of their predecessors whose idea of "change from within" appeared stagnant and unappealing.³⁷

Departing from cyclical theory, Richard English's *Does Terrorism Work?* provides useful insights into the educational aspects of terrorism. With both Lenin and *Weather* following the trends of cyclical theory, English notes that it is not uncommon for terrorists or revolutionaries to be highly educated individuals who attempt to use publicity to inform the masses.³⁸ Even if the terrorists or revolutionaries themselves are not traditionally educated, they tend to emerge from student movements or have an academic leader who guides their action.³⁹ Oftentimes, English notes, terrorists and revolutionaries latch on to the first pieces of information they study and have very little tolerance for counter-information.⁴⁰ He emphasizes that many leftist revolutions only became successful when leaders consulted scholars and revolutionary literature at length, spanning borders in order to find the most applicable theories and tactics.⁴¹ Based on Schlesinger and

³⁴ Bernardine Dohrn, "Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism: Political Statement of the Weather Underground," in *Sing a Battle Song: The Revolutionary Poetry, Statements, and Communiqués of the Weather Underground, 1970-1974*, ed. Bernardine Dohrn, Bill Ayers, and Jeff Jones (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 231-388, here 247.

³⁵ Schlesinger, *Cycles of American History*, 328.

³⁶ Dohrn, "Prairie Fire," 252. For further examples, see Gerry Adams, *Before the Dawn: An Autobiography* (first published 1996; Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018); and Mamdouh Nofal, "Yasir Arafat, the Political Player: A Mixed Legacy," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 35, no. 2 (January 2006): 23-37.

³⁷ Dohrn, "Prairie Fire," 252.

³⁸ English, *Does Terrorism Work*, 98.

³⁹ English, *Does Terrorism Work*, 103; Walter Laqueur, *A History of Terrorism* (first published 1977; New York: Little, Brown, 1997), 205.

⁴⁰ English, *Does Terrorism Work*, 103.

⁴¹ English, *Does Terrorism Work*, 103.

Parker, a working knowledge of the cyclical and wave nature of violent and revolutionary history is a necessary tool for revolutionaries who hope to be successful. Lenin himself studied both his contemporaries and earlier movements to build a successful revolution.⁴² However, because *Weather* limited its revolutionary foundations, it was difficult to understand exactly what sources they should draw from. Their primary publications and memoirs confirm their limitation in sources because they deemed nearly every movement—apart from their own contemporaries—as failed or antirevolutionary.

No study on *Weather* could be complete without historian Van Gosse's rich New-Left research. Gosse's 2005 work, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History*, provides a contextual look at *Weather*'s motivations and development.⁴³ Gosse only briefly mentions the student movements of the late sixties and delves more deeply into the movements that were contemporary to and inspirational for *Weather*. This aids the analysis in developing an understanding as to why Leninist theory was rather unpopular among the American and global Left.⁴⁴ Most importantly, both in *Rethinking the New Left* and in *Movements of the New Left*,⁴⁵ Gosse's discussion of Black Power provides a better understanding of *Weather*'s proximity to the movement with which it most wanted to align itself.⁴⁶

For scholars of the New Left, there is fortunately no shortage of primary sources in the form of memoirs and a vast number of other publications. For the purposes of this study, the *Weather* manifesto, "You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows" (1969), and the book *Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism* (1974) provide most of the primary content. To further support this article's arguments, a memoir by *Weather* member and founder Mark Rudd adds a personal confirmation to the academic scholarship. Rudd discusses both the failings of *Weather* and his own disillusionment with the Left that led him personally to militant violence. He also confirms *Weather*'s dedication to contemporary movements and a sort-of rejection of the past.⁴⁷ Studying the past appeared as too intellectual, which, *Weather* felt, would separate them from the class with whom they were attempting to integrate.⁴⁸ It was this rejection of thorough study that prevented *Weather* from understanding appropriate tactics to develop their movement into a success. Although they were all highly educated, Rudd discusses the guilt they felt for having access to such

⁴² Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 50.

⁴³ Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 192.

⁴⁴ Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*, 196.

⁴⁵ Van Gosse, *The Movements of the New Left: 1950-1975: A Brief History with Document* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

⁴⁶ Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*, 83.

⁴⁷ Rudd, *Underground*, 78.

⁴⁸ Phelps, "New Left," 85.

intellectual resources.⁴⁹ Thus, their examples to learn about successful revolution were the contemporary movements commonly discussed in popular media.

III. From Student Organizing to Terrorist Action

To introduce *Weather*, one must first understand the circumstances from which it arose. Its parent organization, *Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)*, was on a collision course for collapse by the late 1960s. Factionalism was abounding, and groups were struggling to build an identity separate from contemporary and previous movements.⁵⁰ Traditional American leftists, or the “Old Left,” had such a poor reputation in society since the turn of the century that the New-Left movement as a whole was a rebellion against that history. From corrupt labor unions to largely inactive philosophers, America was not exactly an incubator for positive leftist inspiration.⁵¹ The New Left wanted to reinvent itself in accordance with the ideas and methods of successful revolutionaries, not merely failed ideologues.⁵² Domestic leftists did not just have a poor reputation; it was difficult to connect any movement with the Soviets due to the political atmosphere in America.⁵³ Not even the New Left was immune to the country’s extreme anti-communism. In response, Carl Oglesby and several anti-war figures of the 1960s propagated a return to pre-Stalin communism and socialism, as the Soviet dictator’s actions had seriously tainted the leftist movement.⁵⁴ Oglesby’s and C. Wright Mills’s suggestion of Lenin as an exemplar proved fruitful only in the later part of the decade, after anti-intellectualism had led to often rushed and wrong interpretations of any ideological literature.⁵⁵ While Oglesby and Mills were almost divine figures on *SDS* reading lists, their suggestions proved difficult to accept in the political climate of the late 1960s. They found themselves idealized, yet ignored, in the radicalization of the movement because their propositions favored intellectualism, which was becoming increasingly unpopular.⁵⁶

However, the use of any communist or socialist writings with connections to the Soviet Union—which *Weather* condemned as antirevolutionary and imperialistic—was unappealing to idealistic youth, while vibrant figures like Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, and Huey Newton seemed fresh and new. More traditional Marxist factions decried the inclusion of such specific examples, while the *Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM)*, later to become *Weather*, argued that they

⁴⁹ Rudd, *Underground*, 104.

⁵⁰ Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*, 105.

⁵¹ Schlesinger, *Cycles of American History*, 212.

⁵² Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*, 107.

⁵³ Phelps, “New Left,” 83.

⁵⁴ Phelps, “Lenin and American Radicalism,” 87.

⁵⁵ Phelps, “Lenin and American Radicalism,” 81. See Carl Oglesby, *The New Left Reader* (New York: Grove Press, 1969).

⁵⁶ Rudd, *Underground*, 72.

were important as action was more beneficial than having a perfect doctrine.⁵⁷ Because imperialism became the popular enemy of the New Left, RYM quickly gained the upper hand over the faction that was supporting theory in use by one of the largest imperial states in the world.⁵⁸ Changing its name to *Weathermen* (or *Weather Organization*), this action-focused faction split from SDS and decried its parent organization's complacency with antirevolutionaries and lack of action.⁵⁹ Rudd's memoir in particular discusses the tactic of condemning any criticism of their ideology as antirevolutionary, largely because it was more "romantic" to gain more enemies than it was to incorporate new doctrine and admit mistakes.⁶⁰

This popular radical narrative caused several problems within the New-Left movement, mainly domestically in the United States, as groups like *Weather* were ignoring circumstantial differences globally. Rudd notes that *Weather* made an effort, however unconscious, to avoid more apt early Soviet doctrine and methodology.⁶¹ His memoir discusses the extent to which *Weather* members, or cadre, praised anti-intellectualism; therefore, when they did include Lenin, they only included those of his most popular and quotable works that aligned, shallowly, with their own goals.⁶² Basically, instead of learning from the past to create goals, they predetermined their cause and then found justifications. The unofficial New-Left and radical handbook was Régis Debray's 1967 *Revolution in the Revolution* which often represented the extent of the movement's exposure to Lenin.⁶³ However, the attitudes regarding their own privilege limited the amount *Weather* believed it should read.⁶⁴ This limitation kept the full extent of Lenin's influence from informing his spiritual revolutionary successors.

IV. *Weather's Early Doctrine*

Weather outlined its early doctrine in a manifesto published in 1969, "You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows." This text quickly summarizes *Weather's* main goal as establishing "world communism" with very little description of how it hopes to accomplish such a task.⁶⁵ In fact, it outlines its goals in terms of other groups. By stating that "the [oppressed peoples] will continue to set the terms for class struggle in America," *Weather* passes the burden

⁵⁷ Dohrn, "Weather Eye," 140. For American New Left factions, see Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (first published 1994; New York: Open Road Distribution, 2016).

⁵⁸ Rudd, *Underground*, 72.

⁵⁹ Dohrn, "Weather Eye," 141.

⁶⁰ Rudd, *Underground*, 107.

⁶¹ Rudd, *Underground*, 132.

⁶² Rudd, *Underground*, 130.

⁶³ Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?* trans. Bobbye Ortiz (New York: MR Press, 1967).

⁶⁴ Rudd, *Underground*, 94.

⁶⁵ Dohrn, "Weather Eye," 143.

of developing a tactical and strategic plan in the long term.⁶⁶ While appearing as an attempt to defer expertise to the interests of the proletariat, it limited what *Weather* could do. In this way, *Weather* followed a quite traditional “dictatorship of the proletariat” approach by ensuring that the working class and oppressed groups would have the only voice that mattered in the revolution.⁶⁷ In some sense, *Weather* attempted to portray themselves—White, upper-class students—as devoid of class privilege in order to serve those oppressed in the world. Simultaneously, they brought their “enlightened” sense of revolution to the “brainwashed” imperialist victims to allow them to lead the revolution with *Weather* as their willing army.⁶⁸ Their doctrine points to them as fighters for the revolution and class consciousness but not as the ones who should lead any part of it. In short, they present themselves as pawns to a newly conscious proletariat.

The manifesto, besides consistently referencing popular revolutionaries of the time, also provides an in-depth definition of American imperialism. Importantly for this study, the manifesto discusses how American imperialism affects other groups and nations rather than the members of *Weather* themselves. One might argue that the Black Power movement is still part of the United States, however, on multiple occasions throughout the manifesto, *Weather* insists that a Black Nation is a separate, self-determining nation.⁶⁹ For purposes of analysis, this article will use *Weather*'s interpretation. Most often, it uses the term “Black colony” and discusses its need for autonomy apart from the United States government.⁷⁰ So, having clarified the definition of “other groups and nations,” the issue with *Weather*'s doctrine comes to light when considering who they quote. As mentioned previously, *Weather* frequently drew upon Castro and Ho.⁷¹ These two revolutionaries attempted to push out colonial or puppet states, while *Weather* tried to undermine its own government. *Weather*'s revolution was internal with external consequences. Such revolutions often find themselves less accepted by the public as the government does not appear as a common enemy to a majority of people.⁷² Particularly in a democratic society—even though *Weather* debated just how representative American democracy really was—internal upheaval becomes increasingly difficult as, theoretically, there are other more peaceful ways to change policy.

⁶⁶ Dohrn, “Weather Eye,” 142.

⁶⁷ Davis, “Lenin’s Theory of War,” 15.

⁶⁸ Dohrn, “Weather Eye,” 144.

⁶⁹ Dohrn, “Weather Eye,” 139.

⁷⁰ Dohrn, “You Don’t Need a Weatherman,” 68.

⁷¹ They also utilized writings and speeches by Huey Newton, but as his party, at the time, was more invested in community programs than revolution, it is important to focus on the revolutionaries they believe could aid both their own and Newton’s goals. For Newton and the New Left, see Kieran Taylor, “Turn to the Working Class: The New Left, Black Liberation, and the U.S. Labor Movement (1967–1981)” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007).

⁷² English, *Does Terrorism Work*, 43.

Rudd's memoir once again provides confirmation of much of this doctrine. Because *Weather's* manifesto stressed placing the leadership of the masses on the working class, anti-intellectualism ran rampant in the ranks.⁷³ Rudd, as well as several other former members, discussed that being the least-read member was a badge of honor of sorts.⁷⁴ This move away from their own backgrounds occurred with the hope that they could integrate with the proletariat. Education born out of an imperialist system could only foster imperialist tendencies in them, thus only immersion into working-class spheres could provide revolutionary-friendly education.⁷⁵ Ron Jacobs's work further highlights this rejection of any class privilege that could prove useful later. A better understanding of history, political science, international relations, economics, warfare, and many more fields that could have improved their doctrine and tactics was dismissed as "bourgeois" and imperialist.⁷⁶ Because *Weather's* members learned about these subjects at university—prestigious universities for the most part, they saw their lessons as detrimental to implementing a pure dictatorship of the proletariat.

V. A Leninist Comparison

The similarities between the political climate that fostered Lenin's and *Weather's* movements are apparent in relation to cyclical theory. In each case, the presence of an "Old" movement limited what the groups could and would believe, as well as how they planned to realize those beliefs. Lenin's old-guard rivals mirrored the Old Left in several ways. For one, their dedication to gradual reform frustrated young radicals. In *Weather's* case, historian Van Gosse notes, "cold war liberalism was moderate ideology repudiating any taint of radicalism," because the idealism of the midcentury created a systemic loyalty.⁷⁷ Similarly, in Lenin's case, the Czarist system had created a vacuum of sorts for any political movement to develop without extreme action.⁷⁸ Disillusioned with parliamentary or otherwise established politics without some indication of radical change, both Lenin and *Weather* preached collective action.⁷⁹ Secondly, image was a problem for the old-guard Left in both cases. *Weather* was facing a fierce anti-communist public and an anti-Soviet New-Left community, therefore their own ideological options were limited due to societal pressures on multiple fronts.⁸⁰ Because *Weather* was staunchly anti-imperialistic, they had very few examples outside of Lenin that provided a framework befitting of such circumstances. Similar to Lenin's Social

⁷³ Rudd, *Underground*, 122.

⁷⁴ Rudd, *Underground*, 119.

⁷⁵ Rudd, *Underground*, 100.

⁷⁶ Jacobs, *Way the Wind Blew*, 104.

⁷⁷ Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*, 151.

⁷⁸ Phelps, "Lenin and American Radicalism," 85.

⁷⁹ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 53.

⁸⁰ Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*, 151.

Democrats, this required *Weather* to pull ideology, tactics, and members from outside mildly compatible groups to avoid isolating themselves and to attempt an “all-sided” methodology in a class-diverse nation.⁸¹

There is evidence of an early, though adapted, attempt at an “all-sided” agitation approach. *Weather* tried to integrate itself as the terrorist wing of economic and political programs, largely of the *Black Panther Party (BPP)*.⁸² The manifesto consistently references its work as a partner of sorts to community programs of the *BPP*.⁸³ Additionally, the manifesto’s emphasis on deferring to political priorities expressed by minorities and oppressed peoples shows at least some attempt to integrate a multi-faceted approach.⁸⁴ However, this was not a united front. The manifesto actually states outright that they would not seek a united front as class interests differed too greatly.⁸⁵ Lenin, meanwhile, had emphasized the necessity of different wings within the same united front or party; these pieces needed to work in tandem with common goals. *Weather*, however, sought to act as a White terrorist wing of multiple different parties, all with different goals. While it was popular for groups to reference and celebrate each other in speeches and writings, these groups were hardly united in ideology and goals.⁸⁶ *Weather* attempted to address many of *BPP*’s goals in their manifesto, yet, they acted independently from its ranks.⁸⁷ Lenin had emphasized that each stratum of society had its own role to play, however, there also had to be at least some unity and understanding of common goals. *Weather*’s adaptation overreached its own capacity to unite as a cohesive front, thus allowing for continued disunity and misunderstandings between groups.

Because *Weather*’s revolution was internally based, Lenin’s own revolutionary strategy would foresee several problems. For one, Lenin outlines circumstantial tactics that discuss how each specific tactic would work within his own country and government. He drew largely on Russian thinkers or pure theoreticians like Marx and Engels. Davis notes that Lenin adapted and amended his own theory throughout his revolutionary career to include works of contemporaries who were covering topics on which he considered himself weak.⁸⁸ Davis’s analysis of Lenin’s relationship toward his rival Leon Trotsky emphasizes that Lenin was largely

⁸¹ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 54. *Weather*’s focus on groups in only working-class communities attempted the initial steps of Lenin’s “all-sided” approach by incorporating more traditional union-led leftism; however, they stopped short at attempting to sway other middle and upper class actors who could provide a wide variety of capital Lenin calls upon.

⁸² Jacobs, *Way the Wind Blew*, 96.

⁸³ Dohrn, “Weather Eye,” 139.

⁸⁴ Dohrn, “Weather Eye,” 143.

⁸⁵ Dohrn, “Weather Eye,” 141.

⁸⁶ Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*, 145.

⁸⁷ Dohrn, “Weather Eye,” 141.

⁸⁸ Davis, “Lenin’s Theory of War,” 13.

positive with regard to criticism from potential allies and foes.⁸⁹ When a contemporary pointed out a flaw or weakness in a publication, Lenin worked to amend it in a later work, ever aware of the circumstantial developments.⁹⁰ In *What Is to Be Done*, Lenin notes that he was relatively wary of drawing too much inspiration from other movements, because only those who live through a particular situation fully understand its inner workings.⁹¹

Particularly during a time of several revolutions, both colonial and internal, Lenin's revolutionary philosophy was an early reflection of *Weather's* time. *Weather* also came to the forefront during a time of global revolution, but focused on the possibility rather than the plausibility of their own circumstances. There were plenty of examples that made revolution seem possible, but there were not enough circumstantially similar examples to make their doctrine plausible.⁹² Largely because there were multiple examples of revolutions and movements far removed from the Cuba and Vietnam models, deeper study, as Lenin suggests multiple times throughout his work, would have shown that the revolutionary attitude was not as universal as *Weather* was preaching.⁹³ For example, there were numerous anti-communist movements in the late 1960s that are largely ignored in *Weather's* writings. Czechoslovakia provides one of the most salient examples of this lack of revolutionary globalism.⁹⁴

Possibly the most significant connection to Lenin that *Weather* ignored was his theory on privilege, power, and role delegation. We have already seen some of this when analyzing the "all-sided approach," but at this juncture a look into the treatment of one's own privilege is an interesting addition. *Weather's* manifesto outlines several classes of American and international society, and how each can benefit the revolution.⁹⁵ However, *Weather* discusses how each class has to sacrifice its unique qualities and skillsets in order to incorporate itself into a cohesive, totally equal society.⁹⁶ *Weather* hoped that by becoming federal fugitives, they would shirk their White, upper-class privilege and level themselves with minorities.⁹⁷ This was arguably the greatest shortcoming of their doctrine, as this misunderstands how privilege operates. As mentioned earlier, Dohrn spent time

⁸⁹ Davis, "Lenin's Theory of War," 17.

⁹⁰ Phelps, "Lenin and American Radicalism," 85.

⁹¹ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 52.

⁹² Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*, 143.

⁹³ Czechoslovakia's revolt, the Prague Spring, was also an example of fighting to remove an imperialist, puppet state and gain more autonomy for one's own government. In this way, it aligns with Castro and Ho's revolutions but shows that the doctrine and reason behind revolution was not at all universal. For this distinction, see Jiří Suk, "The Utopian Rationalism of the Prague Spring of 1968," *The American Historical Review* 123, no. 3 (June 2018): 764-768.

⁹⁴ Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year that Rocked the World* (New York: Random House, 2004), 36.

⁹⁵ Dohrn, "Weather Eye," 142.

⁹⁶ Dohrn, "Weather Eye," 143.

⁹⁷ Jacobs, *Way the Wind Blew*, 88.

on the “FBI’s Most Wanted” list, yet she never served a prison sentence. By comparison, *Black-Panthers* co-founder Bobby Seale and Angela Davis, also a *Black Panther* and supporter of the Soledad Brothers, to name only two, served substantial prison time despite having similar track records.⁹⁸ Just because they committed crimes and became fugitives did not erase the privilege that *Weather* had as White, upper-class individuals. Lenin, though choosing to live a life materially similar to the average working-class person, recognized that privilege had afforded him several educational and legal benefits.⁹⁹

VI. *Weather’s Last Stand*

Prairie Fire was *Weather’s* recognition of their revolutionary ideological shortcomings and represents their most overt adoption of Leninist ideology. Published in 1974, it was *Weather’s* conscious attempt to incorporate Leninism into their doctrine and provided far more historical, researched examples than their initial manifesto.¹⁰⁰ Jacobs’s comprehensive book on *Weather* even describes an awakening to the pitfalls of rejecting intellectualism, evidence of intensive study, and the incorporation of counter-arguments.¹⁰¹ Several studies note that a budding two-tier system of *Weather* worked together to build a far more Leninist policy. *Prairie Fire* first lists its accomplishments with a critical view of how they could be improved by following better, more fitting tactics. Dohrn notes that, largely because of guilt from privilege, the members of *Weather* had acted rashly and largely unprepared in the face of the “terrible cost of not doing all [they] possibly [could],” which had oftentimes yielded misunderstandings and strategic failures.¹⁰² Jacobs’s work discusses that there was a conscious attempt to adopt an increasingly Leninist approach the more these failures accumulated.¹⁰³

The biggest change that *Prairie Fire* outlines, and the most Leninist, is its call for a “Prairie Fire Organizing Committee.” This committee would act as an “above-ground political wing” of *Weather*, working to influence the voting and demonstrating masses in tandem with any planned *Weather* actions.¹⁰⁴ This directly incorporates Lenin’s call for a multi-faceted approach. According to Jacobs, the group “renounced its previous tendency which [had] demanded immediate revolution in the United States” and noted that, upon further reflection, a large-scale revolution attempting to dismantle a global imperialist state would

⁹⁸ “Dissident Activity January 1966 through January 1973,” General CIA Records, approved for release June 19, 2003.

⁹⁹ Rucker, “Making of the Russian Revolution,” 23.

¹⁰⁰ Dohrn, “Prairie Fire,” 254.

¹⁰¹ Jacobs, *Way the Wind Blew*, 145.

¹⁰² Dohrn, “Prairie Fire,” 247.

¹⁰³ Jacobs, *Way the Wind Blew*, 167.

¹⁰⁴ Dohrn, “Prairie Fire,” 251.

require multiple long-term stages.¹⁰⁵ Terrorism and other violence would have its role in the revolution, however, it could not be every aspect of it. Dohrn notes,

[w]e were correct in our decision to prepare and build the armed struggle. There is a strategic necessity to build an underground movement, to learn to fight through fighting, to pull forward into the conflict. There is a need to develop militant action, and from militant action to develop guerrilla activity. This beginning involved a confrontation with privilege and inhibition and was impolite, rough, disruptive, and disorderly. It was an essential step forward, and could not be held back for some “perfect moment.”¹⁰⁶

Dohrn’s recognition that their violent action could only be a part, albeit an essential one, of the revolution directly reflects Lenin’s own philosophies. It also mirrors the trends of contemporary groups who were beginning to accept more political means as a crucial, tactical aspect of their movements rather than as a mere afterthought.¹⁰⁷ English notes these trends as a natural progression in many terrorist organizations, particularly those based on a communist or more specifically Leninist model.¹⁰⁸ Once terrorism alienates its base, it has to moderate itself to survive.

Additionally, *Prairie Fire* is an attempt at recognizing the shortcomings of anti-intellectualism in the movement and embraces the skillsets brought to the revolution by peoples of numerous backgrounds. Phelps discusses Lenin’s own tempestuous relationship with accepting that class struggle cannot rely solely on the strengths of one class and how, even in *What Is to Be Done*, his acceptance of variant class skills is strained.¹⁰⁹ However, *Weather*’s contemporary revolutionary movements were becoming either increasingly intellectual or increasingly self-destructive. Throughout the early 1970s, members of the *Black Panther Party* like Huey Newton and Angela Davis pursued higher education, which made *Weather*’s argument against the university as imperialist difficult to justify, especially considering their philosophy of following the lead of the “oppressed masses.” One could argue that, in their new adoption of Leninist study and intellectualism, *Weather* was actually staying true to their philosophy. If Black Power was adopting intellectual study—following the lead of other proletariat-led revolutions, then they were merely following the dictatorship of the proletariat, which had been their goal from the outset. However, the revolutionary role of intellectualism is far more complicated than mere presence or absence.¹¹⁰ The choice to adopt

¹⁰⁵ Jacobs, *Way the Wind Blew*, 160.

¹⁰⁶ Dohrn, “Prairie Fire,” 243.

¹⁰⁷ Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*, 133.

¹⁰⁸ English, *Does Terrorism Work*, 42.

¹⁰⁹ Phelps, “Lenin and American Radicalism,” 89.

¹¹⁰ English, *Does Terrorism Work*, 76. The debate over intellectualism in the revolution was a global theme. It led to a split in the Irish Republican Army in 1969 between a hardline militant faction and an intellectual Leninist one. See Lorenzo Bosi, “Explaining Pathways to Armed Activism in the Provisional Irish Republican Army, 1969–1972,” *Social Science History* 36, no. 3 (2012): 347–390.

intellectualism could point to a more copycat nature on *Weather's* part. However, the concerted effort to incorporate the goals of the Left as a whole, which had returned to a study of Leninism, indicates a survivalist adaptation.¹¹¹ Essentially, *Weather*, as well as many similar groups at the time, began to understand that they could not work independently from the history of their movement. In this way, incorporating Leninist attitudes on intellectualism in the revolution gave *Weather* a small second wind, with *Prairie Fire* becoming sought-after literature.

Prairie Fire's discussion of historical student examples, however, remains somewhat limited. Though *Weather* reached a turning point in their attitude toward intellectualism, their admiration of Castro and Black Power still ran deep, probably more so than it should have.¹¹² Dohrn defends this, however, stating that “the maturing of the movement took place at a time when the world was in flames,” and Castro provided a vibrant example of global revolution that bolstered *Weather's* belief that their movement was possible.¹¹³ However, it was nearly impossible for *Weather* to receive the same sympathy as other—or even from other—global revolutionaries, because, even though they claimed to fight for the oppressed, their domestic situation seemed comparatively unobjectionable. Therefore, it was far harder for *Weather* to integrate themselves into the global revolutionary narrative. This is *Prairie Fire's* adoption of circumstantial tactics, again preached by Lenin, namely, to understand how *Weather* could use its privilege as upper-class citizens and as relatively comfortable Americans to revolutionize global affairs.¹¹⁴ Though this was probably *Weather's* least concerted effort at embracing Lenin's teachings, the fact that they implemented any of them meant that his theories of circumstantial tactics had made an impact.

There are, of course, numerous differences between Lenin and *Weather*. This analysis merely argues that the differences were not enough to make Lenin less apt an example from whom *Weather* could draw inspiration. The largest difference between them were their circumstantial governmental systems. Czarist Russia did not provide nearly the participatory democracy that was present in twentieth-century America. Lenin himself notes that terrorism should be reserved for situations most similar to his own and not in places like the United States or the United Kingdom, where participation is ingrained into the governmental structure.¹¹⁵ Though members of the New-Left movement might have debated the claim that the United States were any more representative than Czarist Russia, one could argue, theoretically, that Lenin's philosophy was never meant to work in the United States. In this case, Marx's own industrial philosophy would prove more fitting as America was an industrial society with an organized labor population.

¹¹¹ Jacobs, *Way the Wind Blew*, 163.

¹¹² Dohrn, “Prairie Fire,” 248.

¹¹³ Dohrn, “Prairie Fire,” 247.

¹¹⁴ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 52.

¹¹⁵ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 61.

However, Lenin's philosophies consider the circumstances of a conscious upper class rather than a conscious working one. Marx, Castro, and Ho all relied on the vanguard of the people rather than facing a reversal of consciousness that is not conducive to a Marxist "spontaneous" revolution.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, Lenin's considerations of nuanced consciousness in society provided direct solutions for an upper-class set of revolutionaries like *Weather*.

Conclusion: Fading into Obscurity

Ultimately, *Prairie Fire* was too little too late. *Weather* had already alienated itself from the comrades that it sought in Black Power and global movements by waiting for them to provide direction. *Weather* also alienated itself from potential allies by rejecting any philosophy that did not come directly from the global working class or oppressed peoples. This disconnect between varying subgroups within the New Left pushed *Weather* into its own category that no one was particularly inclined to associate with. While oppressed groups attempted to legitimize their struggles, *Weather's* doctrine appeared too opportunistic.¹¹⁷ Idealistic leftists saw *Weather* as simplifying radicalization to an extreme because they had not learned from past struggles. By overestimating the power of an isolated terrorist movement, *Weather* set themselves up for failure. Had Lenin been their focal point—as opposed to the trends of the global Left, *Weather* could have provided a far more viable plan for revolution. In a larger organization with roles for every class of person—since every class had some skillset to contribute, the Leninist model could have changed *Weather's* trajectory. The *Prairie-Fire* days of *Weather* saw this realization spread throughout the group's leadership who finally recognized the shortcomings of their early "Weatherman" manifesto. However, *Prairie Fire* came at a time when misinterpretations of Lenin and the early contemporaries of Castro and Ho had already driven *Weather* away from any allies or traction. It was only a matter of time for the government to catch up with their simple plan.

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¹¹⁶ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, 63.

¹¹⁷ Gosse, *Movements of the New Left*.