

MINNEAPOLIS, MN – When journalist Craig Cox talks about the Co-op Wars, it sounds like he’s describing a work of fiction: a Marxist cult led by a mysterious figure, whose disciples armed themselves with weapons and committed violent assaults. Was this the work of the Weather Underground? No, it’s the story a group of part-time grocery workers.

In the mid-1970’s, Twin Cities food co-ops had become a battleground—quite literally—in a war pitting hippie anarchists against a group of hardcore Marxist-Leninists (the “CO”).

Beginning in 1971, anti-war activists had founded more than two-dozen natural foods co-ops in Minneapolis and St. Paul. These early food co-ops, based on the anarchist principle of mutual aid, were owned and operated entirely by volunteer members –an informal structure, best symbolized by the Mill City Co-op’s decision to allow the customers to ring up their own purchases. It was an alternative system of economics that sought to prefigure a more egalitarian world.

In 1978, Cox, a former executive editor at the *Utne Reader* and currently editor of the *Minneapolis Observer*, started researching the Co-op Wars. His resulting 1994 book *Storefront Revolution: Food Co-ops and the Counterculture* (Rutgers University Press) is considered by many to be the definitive history of the movement.

“I got involved in the Twin Cities co-ops in 1977,” says Cox. “So the war was more-or-less over by that point, but I was intrigued by all the rumors and legends surrounding it. Prior to the food co-ops, I had worked in the housing co-op movement... I was also working on the *Scoop* newspaper, which was the newspaper for all the co-ops and alternative organizations in the Twin Cities.”

According to Cox, the natural food co-ops “really flourished in the Twin Cities” – more so than in other major cities such as Chicago and New York. This was partly due to the presence of the university, and a vibrant radical community. But mainly, it was because the Twin Cities “had a real surplus of cheap storefront space.” The birth of the co-op movement had neatly coincided with the rise of larger supermarkets. Unable to compete for lower prices, many of the older “mom-and-pop” grocery stores were being forced out of business. This left dozens of empty shops. “So you had well-equipped little stores, with low overhead and very low rent. The refrigeration was there, the produce coolers were there, so it was really easy to set up a co-op in one of these storefronts and make a go of it.”

What had started as small, informal buying clubs quickly developed into a citywide network, with co-ops in every neighborhood.

“Co-ops were self-consciously neighborhood / community-based storefront organizations,” says longtime co-op activist Jeff Nygaard. “There were all these other non-food co-ops, too. All sorts of things, from clothing, to bicycles, to automobiles, to electronics –all kinds of co-ops. You lived it!”

The new business model was reflected in a wide range of local businesses. These “non-food co-ops” included a cooperative hardware store, an apothecary, four construction companies, a bike shop, a print shop, four bookstores, three restaurants, three bakeries, eight theater and dance collectives, daycare facilities, a community credit union, and a worker-owned clothing store. (1)

While the anarchists saw the co-ops as a form of alternative economics, others on the Left accused co-op activists of being nothing but “hippie elitists.” Instead of “playing at revolution” by “selling specialty foods to middle class hippies,” the Marxist-Leninists thought that the co-ops should be used as tools in the class war. The hippies disagreed. This sometimes violent disagreement was what led to the Co-op Wars. Ostensibly a battle over the co-ops’ commitment to “serve the working class” (as symbolized by the sale of sugar and canned foods), what had started as a verbal dispute quickly escalated to beatings and fisticuffs.

By 1976, whatever sympathy co-op activists might have had for the Marxists was completely overshadowed by their hatred of the CO and its increasingly brutal tactics.

“They did really bad P.R.” says Cox. “I mean [the CO] would go and beat people up. And they would go and firebomb cars. They were at war with that faction of the counterculture that they should have been allied with if they wanted to make serious social change.”

* * *

The first salvo in the Co-op Wars occurred in March of 1975, when a pair of organizers from the Beanery Co-op published what came to be known as the “Beanery Paper.” In it, authors Bob Haugen and Rebecca Comeau accused the “bourgeois” leadership of the co-op movement of deliberately conspiring to manipulate the decision-making process, “so as to prevent working class attitudes and control from replacing their own.”(2)

According Haugen and Comeau, such a bourgeois/middle class orientation was typical of college-educated hippies who had abandoned the anti-imperialist movement in favor of escapism and lifestyle politics.(3) Despite the hyperbole, it was a charge that resonated

with many co-op activists. "I think that even back then, there were a lot of political liberals," says Nygaard. "Meaning that some of us had a radical approach," while the liberals displayed "sort of a white privileged middle class arrogance."

"The Beanery Paper" was followed by a period of intense debate among the local co-ops, with "Jeb Cabbage" and "Emma Evechild" publishing their own position paper, in which they accused the Beanery faction of promoting "pseudo-Marxist revision full of generalizations." (4) Nevertheless, Bob Haugen had found plenty of sympathizers within the food co-ops and among the growing number of Marxist study groups.

In April of 1975, the so-called reform movement led by Haugen and his allies—now known as the Co-op Organization, or "CO"—began to actively recruit new members in order to "transform" the co-ops and wrest control away from the governing Policy Review Board.(5)

On May 3rd, 1975, a group of 35 ultra-radicals from the CO armed themselves with metal pipes and stormed the People's Warehouse, seizing the cash box, and savagely beating anyone who attempted to resist the incursion. This was a major offensive, as the People's Warehouse served as the primary distribution center for most of the neighborhood co-ops. When a couple of hippies came by the Warehouse to heckle the CO, they were attacked with baseball bats.(6) One of the hippies was later treated for broken bones.

Not content with the People's Warehouse, the Co-op Organization proceeded to occupy other Twin Cities food co-ops—all in the name of the working class. Among the CO's stated goals were an to end worker control, greater discipline among co-op workers, accountability to a centralized leadership, an end to "hippie health food," and a commitment to address real "working class concerns.(7) They did this by attacking other activists, both verbally and physically.

Now known officially as the "Mass Organization" (though everyone else continued to refer to them as the CO) the so-called "Stalinist" faction went on a rampage. Cashiers were assaulted at the Seward Co-op; Mill City Co-op was mobbed by Stalinists while Mill City workers and their supporters formed a human chain to protect the store; men in matching sunglasses lurked outside people's homes; windows were broken, tires were slashed, and phone lines were cut. According to MinneapolisStar-Tribune, the CO "were believed to have a cache of weapons stored on the South Side of Minneapolis."(8) It's a wonder that nobody was ever killed.

"That's a warning sign," says Alexandra Stein, a former member of the group. "If your worst enemy is other people on the Left, there's something wrong there."

Unbeknownst to most of the participants, the forcible takeover of the Twin Cities food co-ops was being secretly orchestrated by a man named Theo Smith. Smith was the anonymous leader of a group that called itself “The Organization” (or simply the O.). Both the Co-op Organization (the CO), and its successor the “Mass Organization,” were aspects of the O. Former members of the O. now describe it as “a political cult.” Through a combination of Maoist self-criticism, arranged marriages, and 70’s pop psychology, members of the O. sought to transform themselves into perfect “proletarianized” revolutionaries. But according to internal documents that were later obtained by Cox, Theo Smith’s primary interest in the food co-ops wasn’t political at all: he wanted to use them as front organizations in a money making venture.

“He was sort of a counter-cultural scam artist,” says Cox. “Using the co-ops as a base where he could bring in revenue to his operation by selling food.”

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Very little is known about Theo (Theophilus) Smith, prior to his arrival in Minnesota. Over the years, Smith has employed a number of pseudonyms (including “Randy,” “George James,” and “Edward Louis James,”), which have made his movements even harder to track. In 1980, Smith fled to Chicago, after fatally shooting an African-American DJ named Kyle Steven Ray.

According to Stein, no one outside of Theo’s inner circle knew the real reason behind the sudden move to Chicago. “We were all led to believe that this was because the revolution was really happening in Chicago,” says Stein. “The FBI came to my door to ask about the murder, and I didn’t know what they were talking about.”

After six years on the run, Smith finally surrendered to the authorities in December of 1986. He served a year in the county workhouse, after pleading guilty to manslaughter.(9)

Some believe that Smith would have faced a much harsher sentence if the victim had been white. Others think that Smith may have actually been working for COINTELPRO, the FBI’s domestic surveillance program, and that this explains why he never went to prison. Such speculation is not just paranoia: there have been other, well-documented instances of FBI provocateurs infiltrating Twin Cities activist groups, most notably longtime FBI-informant Michael Fitzpatrick (see: Chapter Nine). Whether Theo Smith was actually working for the government, or was simply a lone troublemaker, may

never be known. What is known for sure, is that in 1973, Theophilus Smith suddenly appeared in Wisconsin at the Winding Road Farm.

Smith claimed to have been a former member of SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAV). His credentials as a black revolutionary appeared to be impeccable. This gave him tremendous credibility among white leftists living in the Midwest.

Smith quickly developed a devoted core of followers, beginning with Bob Haugen and several co-op activists who were living on the Winding Road commune. It was Smith's followers who did all of the actual organizing. As Smith's first lieutenant, Bob Haugen served as the "public face" of the CO. Smith, the ringleader, would remain in the shadows. While hundreds of people passed through the ranks of the Co-op Organization, less than three-dozen would form the central nucleus of the O. And of that three-dozen, only a handful knew of Theo's real identity. Members of the Organization thought that they were part of a much larger movement based in Oakland, CA, whose disciples were being groomed for future positions in a post-revolutionary society.

The genius of the Co-op Organization was that no one outside of Smith's inner circle really knew about the cult. New recruits weren't told that they'd be following Smith's orders. They were told that "democratic centralism" was more efficient, and that "serious revolutionaries" didn't spend all their time sitting around getting stoned.

Craig Cox explains:

"There was a lot of defensiveness in the counter-culture, here and across the country, about the New Left view of revolution. The Marxist view of revolution was: you organize the working class, you organize the proletariat, and you take over the means of production. But of course, the New Left / anarchist idea was that you built according to cooperative, mutual aid economics, and that revolution begins with the individual.

"So it was sort of like the difference between a Gandhian viewpoint of revolution and a Marxist-Leninist viewpoint. But of course, at that time, the people who were involved in the counter-culture were all fairly naïve in terms of personal relationships; pretty naïve in terms of radical politics. And even though everybody read a lot, when it came right down to practice, they could easily be swayed by someone like Theo and his core supporters, who would come out, and sort of shame them about their lack of interest in the working class. And their lack of interest in violent revolution. So, I think they were fairly successful in the early period at swaying some of these New Left-style anarchists to come around to their point of view."

Convinced that the CO cadre was "more disciplined than I am," these poor frightened hippies would cut their hair. "And they shaved their beards off, and they put on

a suit, and they went to work in the real world and tried to take over society from a working class perspective.”

“Looking at it from the outside,” says Cox, “it seemed pretty plausible.”

* * *

Jeff Nygaard worked as a coordinator at the North Country Co-op for 14 years. In the late-1970s, Nygaard also served on the Warehouse Board and the All Co-op Assembly. According to Nygaard, part of the appeal of the CO was that even though they were “nuttier than hell,” their critique of the co-ops rang true:

“The fight was about a vision for the co-ops,” he says. “The question was posed: Are food co-ops about food? Or co-ops? What was the identity of the co-ops? Were co-ops defined by the process of the co-operation? Or were they defined by the food that they were selling? In essence, that’s what the fight was about. How it actually came down was much more complicated.

“At that time,” says Nygaard, “the co-ops were much less formal in terms of structure. In terms of the mission—what drove those organizations—there was much more of a political stance. And many people really thought of them as revolutionary organizations. Rightly, or wrongly. That would be rare now, I would think!

“There was a group of people that called themselves of the Co-op Organization – the CO. And they thought the co-ops were not serving the masses of people, and had an elitist attitude. That was the charge –that the co-ops were elitist; that they were just serving the health food needs of middle class hippies. Which I actually tended to agree with, although I wasn’t in the CO, by any means!

“The way it was sort of caricatured was the health food people versus the canned goods people. Like, the CO would have a co-op, and they’d sell Coke—which was just anathema!—totally heretical to the health food people.” The two sides became “really antagonistic.” With the battle lines clearly drawn, there was no middle ground: “There was ‘RIGHT,’ and there was ‘WRONG.’”

The CO was also holding Marxist study groups. “People would go to these things,” says Cox, “and for some folks, it was the first time that they ever sat down in a group of committed Marxists. And they were swayed by those folks who were passionate about this stuff. And to some of these counter-culturalists, that whole Marxist path seemed to be the more committed path, the less hippie-ish path... the more serious path towards social change.”

These Marxist study groups were closed to the outside world, making them a fertile breeding ground for cult-like activity.

“You had to be invited,” says Cox. “You couldn’t just show up. [The CO] would go around, and they would target certain opinion leaders amongst the radical community.” These opinion leaders were then invited to participate in “special” semi-secret groups. Once they had a captive audience, the CO “would sit them down and work on them... They were pretty effective early on.”

Among these opinion leaders was future Minneapolis City Councilmember Dean Zimmerman.

"People wanted a dramatic change in our society," Zimmerman would later tell the Minneapolis Star Tribune. "And this co-op organization with the left-wing dogma exploited that deep, burning desire."(10)

These days, the radical movement tends to be organized according to anti-authoritarian principles (the “spokesperson” model). The concept of a cadre organization seems totally anachronistic. But such was not the case back in 1973.

“It wasn’t really foreign to our generation of radicals,” says Cox. “Because there were a great many people who studied the Cuban revolution. And a great many people who saw some kind of liberation, some kind of path that made sense to them, in a cadre organization. Part of it was there was a certain defensiveness around living a sort of empty hippie lifestyle. And there were a lot of people who felt like, ‘Well, I want to change the world... but are we really doing it by smoking pot and being vulgar?’

“I think it began to seem a little shallow and undisciplined. And so they would run into people who were very well versed in the whole Marxist-Leninist ideology –and they were cool people! They were people they hung out with. They were people that they saw in the neighborhood. Maybe they had done stuff with them before they went over to Theo’s thing. So they could see that: ‘OK, these people are more disciplined than I am. They seem more committed to making change in the world than I am.’ And I think for some people, it was a fairly attractive alternative.”

Jeff Nygaard concurs: “I got in a bit of trouble, because I actually sort of agreed with some of the arguments of the CO, but I was a ranking guy in the other side! I worked at North Country. And there were a number of us who said ‘We are elitist!’ To take a self-selected group, and to have them agree is not much of a test of democracy. It’s not that hard to get consensus when you kick out everyone who doesn’t agree!”

“The other thing that cannot be escaped from that period,” says Nygaard. “Is that that the core of the co-op movement was white. Totally white. And my analysis of the

class make up was that it was pretty middle class. It was a pretty homogenous group. That's probably why I felt like I fit in. Now my background was working class, but it was kind of a white Minnesota-Scandinavian type of thing, so ethnically I fit in. And with all the talk of 'revolution' at the time, coming from Wauseca, it sounded good to me! And only later did I sort of cool off and say 'Hmmm...what's missing from this picture?'"

Nygaard thinks that despite their tactics, the CO was onto something: it all came down to a question of who the co-ops were really serving. "I agreed that we needed to diversify our product line. There were many fights about that. There was a fight about whether to have meat, or no meat. There was a fight about sugar. There was a fight about cans... About processed food, or no processed food. And this went on for years. Through good financial times, and bad."

Nygaard thinks that the narrow focus on health food really misses the point:

"You could have a store like Whole Foods—that's about as far from democracy as you can get!—and they serve pretty good food, from what I understand. Or you can have a place that's very democratically run, and they could sell anything they want. They could sell electronics. Co-ops have nothing to do with food, per se."

According to Cox, "The CO was the first group that borrowed from, and broke away from, the basic hippie counter-culture." It was this counter-cultural model that distinguishes it from other far-left groups such as the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) "Those were really Old Left groups. They were still operating from this basic Old Left Marxist paradigm that was very party-oriented."

"What was different about what Theo did with the CO is he sort of hijacked this alternative economics idea that the hippie-anarchists had invented. And he wanted to turn it toward some kind of pretend revolutionary mission. 'Cause the RCP and the SWP – those guys didn't have any interest in the co-ops. They were out organizing auto workers. They were organizing other labor unions and doing this labor-based thing. And Theo was still working on these little collectives, these little worker-owned counter-cultural collectives... So it was a different take on it than the old line Marxist parties."

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"There were always tales," says Cox, "and weird mythical legends about who was running the CO and what their mission was—even when I first got involved with the housing co-ops back in '74-75. But I didn't really find out about Theo and confirm that

he was THE GUY until this ex-CO member named Bob Malles showed up on my doorstep in 1993."

"I had already finished the first draft of my book. I left it a mystery, because I didn't know about Theo. I couldn't find anything –I couldn't find the people in the CO who were willing to talk. But apparently word got around to Bob Malles." According to Cox, Malles was "a pretty hardcore member of the CO. He had sort of gotten out of the cult by then... so he showed up on my doorstep with all of these papers. We sat down and went through them, and I interviewed him, and it was all right there! All the documentation was there about [Theo Smith's] involvement."

"There was stuff about Theo's control over people's behavior. There were letters and memos to people saying 'You need to leave this guy and go and live with this guy.' ... There were documents about his front groups; he had a computer company in Illinois, and a daycare center up here in Minneapolis... All that stuff became clearer after Bob Malles came up and emptied-out his cardboard boxes full of documents. It was fairly eye opening. So it was very late in the game that I found out about Theo."

Cox's findings were later confirmed by Alexandra Stein, and other former members of the O.

"Certainly, Theo as an individual was a nut case," says Stein. "There's no doubt in my mind about that. And the effect that he had was to mortally wound the Left here for many years."

* * *

After the takeover of the People's Warehouse, the anarchists fought back, forming a new distribution network called DANCe (Distribution Alliance of the North Country). The name was derived from the famous quote attributed to Emma Goldman: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be a part of your revolution." The name seemed to sum up the anarchists' position: we're not going to let a bunch of dour revolutionaries rain on our parade.

With the DANCe warehouse serving all of the remaining Twin Cities food co-ops, and a new All Co-op Assembly doing outreach to co-ops throughout the state and parts of North Dakota, the CO became the target of a consumer boycott. While the CO maintained control over the People's Warehouse, they couldn't force people to shop there. And the CO's attempts to reorganize the Selby Co-op and the Bryant-Central Co-op met with limited success.

"What tended to happen in those situations," says Cox, "is that [the CO] would come, and they would take over, and then no one would shop there anymore. They would

just go to a different store! I remember, they took over Powderhorn, which is this itty bitty little store! And the people who were volunteering there just said ‘OK’ –and they left. So there were CO cadre sitting at Powderhorn, and nobody came to shop!”

The end result was a series of failed businesses where once there had been a network of thriving community co-ops. In the case of Powderhorn, the CO simply shut it down.

“Of course,” says Cox, “there was all this legal action: everyone had to prove who’s store it was. Few of these co-ops had any sort of legal ownership; they were all-volunteer co-ops. There weren’t any legal owners –they sort of had a board of directors. So there were lots of court cases and lots of legal work that needed to be done to establish who owned what.”

According to Nygaard, the co-ops were forced to adopt a more traditional structure: “That’s partly why the co-ops are much more formal now, in a legal sense. Because literally push-came-to-shove, and it ended up in the courts: who controls this co-op? Who has the right to change the locks?”

“In pretty much every situation,” says Cox, “the original organization and the original group of people reasserted their ownership, and the CO went away.”

Increasingly desperate, the CO sought to exploit the racial sensitivities of their lily-white constituency. As the Peoples' Warehouse began hemorrhaging money, the CO tried to use the African-American community to drive a wedge between the DANCEe co-ops and their supporters. Knowing that the hippies were extremely sensitive to charges of racism, the CO chose a black man named Moe Burton to serve as the public face of the Bryant-Central Co-op.⁽¹¹⁾ This plan backfired when the CO’s chief organizer Bob Haugen—acting on Theo’s direct orders—confronted Burton, and tried to beat him up. ⁽¹²⁾ Shortly thereafter, Burton’s truck was firebombed.

With food literally rotting on the shelves, the People’s Warehouse was nearly bankrupt. While the CO cadre worked for free, Smith’s lieutenants were making cash withdrawals from the bank account. In July, the courts awarded control of the warehouse to the original Policy Review Board. The CO’s bid for control had ended in complete and utter failure: none of their businesses survived, and the warehouse was sold.

“But in a cult organization like what Theo put together, it isn’t at all about goals,” says Cox. “It’s about what Theo wants.”

EPILOGUE

The Co-op Wars had already ended by the time that Alexandra Stein arrived in Minneapolis. But the CO was still around, having shortened their name to the O.

“I didn’t know about any of that until I got out [of the Organization],” says Stein. “And then what astounded me when I got out, and started hearing about the Co-op Wars, was the level of intense bitterness and trauma. 30 years later, people are still traumatized by this experience.”

“That was the big thing with the CO,” says Nygaard. “They were a really screwed-up organization, but their charges of elitism and racism and lack of class consciousness –I absolutely agreed with a lot of what they said! And we changed some things in the co-ops. There are people who will deny this, but we changed because of that struggle. The DANCe faction prevailed, but things were never the same after that.”

In 1982, the All Co-op Assembly was officially disbanded. The anarchists had triumphed, only to see their ideals betrayed. The co-ops had begun hiring professional managers, abandoning the tradition of worker-owners and working members. Decisions were no longer strictly democratic. Instead, power was increasingly concentrated in the hands of the board of directors. At the same time, the number of Twin Cities food co-ops shrank from 25 to six.⁽¹³⁾ Of those six remaining co-ops, only North Country was still a collective.

“I still shop at co-ops,” says Jeff Nygaard. “But I don’t see them as having any revolutionary potential at this point –if they ever did.”

“We had a suggestion book in the co-op for many years, and somebody wrote in it ‘Cut out the politics. Just sell food.’ –Which all of us thought was just absurd! Because you can’t separate any commodity from politics. Certainly not food!

“Its sort of like a liberal-democratic approach... That’s why you have co-ops today that offer classes, and what they offer are cooking classes and vegetarian food classes. There are no classes about co-operative organization. There are no classes about consensus decision-making. There are no classes on the mechanics of democracy or community-building... all of the classes that they are offering are about food. And sure, they’re organized in a co-operative way, but so is Land’O’Lakes! Archer, Daniels, Midland is a goddamned co-op! -price-fixers for the world.”

(In 1996, ADM agreed to pay \$100 million in criminal penalties after pleading guilty to price fixing.)

Nygaard pauses for a moment, and stares off into space. “My little capsule of what happened with the co-ops is that the radicals and the liberals fought. And the liberals won.”

NEXT CHAPTER:
Alexandra Stein - The Story of the "O."

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Alexandra Stein
FORMER CULT MEMBER SPEAKS OUT!

An interview with Alexandra Stein, author of *Inside Out: A Memoir of Entering and Breaking Out of a Minneapolis Political Cult*

Che Guevara: "The Rudolph Valentino of Red Fascism."

SEMI-CONSCIOUS LIBERATION ORGANIZATION

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For nearly a decade, Alexandra Stein was forbidden to communicate with friends and family. She was ordered to relocate to Minneapolis, forced to change careers, and told to enter into an arranged marriage with a man she barely knew.

In order to overcome her "bourgeois intellectual arrogance," Stein was instructed to become a machinist. Later, she was trained as a computer programmer, and sent off to find work in the suburbs as a software engineer.

Alexandra Stein was a member of the "O." (short for "The Organization") – a Marxist-Leninist cult whose members were sworn to absolute secrecy. So secret was the "O.," that its members were forbidden to contact each other, except for official business.

"For many years," says Stein, "my family did not have an address or phone number for me. They had a P.O. box."

Under the guise of security, members of the "O." received a series of written instructions, whose anonymous author was identified only by the initials "P.S." (Program Secretary) or

“P.O.O.” (the acronym was never defined). The true identity of the group’s leader, a man named Theo Smith, remained a mystery until the very end.

“We all had code names,” Stein tells me, “...which were mostly used whenever we put anything in writing... That was all for security in case the State should intercept our communications. We also had code numbers. Mine was ‘NB-25.’ Everyone worked in a ‘program’ – I worked in the bakery – and so ‘NB’ stood for the name of the bakery (Nutritional Bakery) and the number 25 was kind of random.”

Today, Alexandra Stein teaches in the department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota, where she’s enrolled in the doctoral program. “My thesis is called ‘Attachments, Networks, and Discourse in Extremist Political Organizations,’” she says, “i.e., political cults. I try not to use the ‘C’ word, it’s very controversial in academia.”

A native of South Africa, Alexandra Stein grew up in London after her parents went into exile. As the child of “fellow travelers,” Stein was taught to hate Apartheid, and leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) were frequent guests in her parents’ home:

“A lot of their friends were very active, and ended up being leadership within the ANC and the South African Communist Party -and finally the government.” Stein says that her parents had engaged in some minor acts of disobedience prior to emigrating, “but part of the reason why they left South Africa was because they didn’t want to make that commitment.”

That commitment had already landed Nelson Mandela in prison, where he was serving a life sentence on Robben Island. Though not prepared to go to jail, Stein’s parents continued to support the anti-Apartheid movement from abroad, holding fundraisers at their house and helping to resettle other South African exiles.

Growing up in the exile community, Stein was exposed to violence at an early age. Her best friend’s mother had been assassinated by the South African government, killed by a letter bomb sent to her offices at the university.

Stein’s family also had a history of mental illness: her older sister Hatty suffered from bipolar disorder. As a teenager, she recalls watching as her mother wrestled Hatty to the ground to force-feed her barbiturates. Stein’s parents would later divorce, with her father taking up with his longtime mistress. Her mother Jenny and her brother Jeremy both went mad in 1980.

“My family was pretty dysfunctional,” says Stein. “Half of us are the ‘sane half,’ and I like to put myself in that half. Some people might dispute that... It was just a lot of crisis with my older sister being very, very crazy, and no one knowing how to manage her.”

At the age of 15, Alexandra Stein ran away from home –never to return. She hated her upper class prep school, hated the screaming and the lack of emotional support at home, and was afraid of her best friend’s new boyfriend: an Irishman who had introduced the friend to heroin and speed.

“ I met this lovely, handsome Frenchman, who sort of looked after me,” says Stein. “And I ran away to live with him in France.”

Running away from home may have saved her the drug route she says. “I didn’t have too many routes that were looking that good to me. So I picked the one with the Frenchman.

Upon her arrival in Minneapolis, Stein took a taxi to a radical bookstore, where the workers ran out to the payphone to check on her credentials (everyone used payphones to avoid wiretaps).

Stein tries to put this in historical context: “We had come out of a really violent time: the Vietnam war, the civil rights movement... the Black Panthers were getting killed quite often -it was not a rare occurrence. Coming out of infiltration by the FBI into Left organizations... It was the kind of tenor of the times.”

Later, at a house in South Minneapolis, Stein’s host introduced himself by turning up the radio, and putting the telephone in the refrigerator “for security”. Stein was presented with a list of house rules, told to begin volunteering at the bookstore, and after several days of living in isolation (with no casual conversation, no music, and no television), she was given her political assessment: her “Personal Internal Contradiction” was “seeking Enlightenment based on personal judgment.”

In order to overcome her “bourgeois mannerisms” and her “metaphysical nature,” Stein should begin training to become a machinist, while working on developing her full potential within the "O."

POLITICAL BACKLASH: THE REAGAN REVOLUTION

Following her political assessment, Stein remained in Minneapolis for another month, during which she wasn’t allowed to contact any her of friends in San Francisco.

“I was there for six weeks, and I think it was enough to get indoctrinated. There’s a process that happens when you don’t sleep, and you’re cut off from everyone.” Stein thinks that the instability in her personal life, combined with the unfamiliar setting, made her much more vulnerable to someone “trashing” her identity.

“I think the leader, Theo, was very good at knowing where you were at. And cult leaders are generally extremely smart about people and their personalities.”

"Part of the process (and again, this is true of all cults) is that you go through this thing where you tell them everything about yourself. So when I had that assessment done, they knew my whole history, my crazy family... They have all this data about you, and if they're smart, they can use that."

"The dangerous part," she says, "is, once you start using words like 'transforming,' there's an assumption that who you are is basically bad. It's what I call the 'Original Sin' assumption." This gives the organization "a lot of psychological power" over the person whose identity is being called into question. "In my case, I am a very intellectual person, and that was turned against me. So it was a way of doing an end-run around my ability to think myself out of the organization."

Stein returned to San Francisco, where she began receiving written notes from "P.S." -her Program Secretary. All communication from the "O." was sent to a central location, before being forwarded by Stein's official "contact." The memos urged Stein to continue to working with them to overcome her "Bourgeois World Outlook."

Having spent the past six weeks living under very unusual circumstances, Stein was pledged to secrecy: even Andy wasn't supposed to know what had happened during her trip to Minneapolis. "In a way," she says, "it's like a battering relationship, where batterers isolate the people they are battering." As a result, Stein was plagued by recurring nightmares. "I think in my unconscious I was frightened of this group."

In 1981, Stein received written permission to move in with a woman named "Julie" – another member of the "O." The two of them rented a house together in Oakland, while Stein trained as a machinist, eventually landing a job manufacturing axle parts at FABCO.

SEMI-CONSCIOUS LIBERATION ORGANIZATION, Continued...

On December 1st, 1981, less than a year after being told to become a machinist, Stein received a memo instructing her to begin training as a computer programmer. She had reached a new level in her "organizational development."

Stein says that a lot of modern cults get into computers. "You remember Heaven's Gate? They were all computer programmers. 'Cause you can make a lot of money as a programmer."

Towards the end of that same month, Stein was told to break up with her boyfriend and enter into a Personal Relationship (or "PR") with "Stan" from Minneapolis. She remembered having been repulsed by Stan. Stein wrote back to suggest that she might be more compatible with Stan's roommate Ted Brodsky.

That winter, Stein was formally disciplined for engaging in “anti-organizational activity.” While on a family vacation in Florida, she received a phone call telling her to return to Oakland immediately: Stein had failed to clear the trip ahead of time. Stein was warned that her relationship with her parents was “upholding her bourgeois side.”

Stein flew home to Oakland, where she found a memo lying on the dresser: her request for a “PR” had been approved. She was to move in with Ted “with the strategic aim of having a child.”

“I suppose, at that point I saw the Organization as a secret cadre disciplined organization,” says Stein. “So it kind of made sense: I was going to join this organization that was a revolutionary organization. And they’re also providing me with a revolutionary partner. It seemed perfect, actually. So that kind of overrode the weirdness.”

Stein’s experience with Ted was not typical of the “O.” “...Because I actually, as the British say, ‘fancied’ this guy -I thought he was cute.” Others were not so lucky. Many couples were broken-up as a “Method of Correction.”

Stein thinks that she got her first choice because Theo, the leader, wanted to cement her relationship to the organization. Theo had an almost intuitive sense of where people were at; he was good at doling-out punishments and rewards. “Like the thing where he offered me this guy who I was repulsed by, and I said ‘no’ -he didn’t push that. At that point, I would have left. It would have been too much for me then.”

“Nonetheless, having said that, I got into a relationship [with Ted] without hardly knowing him. Let me explain that –I fancied him, but I didn’t know him!”

On May 1st, 1982, Alexandra Stein relocated to Minneapolis to begin her “Personal Relationship” with Ted.

“When we first got married – and we got married within a very short time of my arriving -- we hardly knew each other! I knew that he had a regular job, and then he would go from his regular job to his ‘program.’ And I wasn’t supposed to know what that was. I guessed that it was a print shop, because he would come home with ink all over his fingers. You didn’t have to be a detective to figure out what people were doing, but you weren’t supposed to talk about it. And we didn’t.”

Everyone in the “O.” was assigned to a “program.” Working on a program meant volunteering at one of the numerous small businesses owned and operated by the cult: a bakery, a software company, a daycare center, a print shop, an apartment complex, a building contractor. All of this was supposed to be kept secret –even from your spouse.

“If you worked in a ‘program’ you weren’t supposed to talk about it. And that was all based on the idea of the classic cell structure: the less you knew, the less you’d be able to tell when the State pulled your fingernails out.”

For next nine years, this was Stein’s entire life: after working full time at her day job, she would put in a full shift at the bakery or the print shop, before collapsing from sheer exhaustion.

“We weren’t even doing anything political! We’d churn out business leaflets for some of the various computer businesses that were part of the cult’s front groups and moneymaking groups. So you’d be churning out these computer things –and doing a really bad job of it, ‘cause these presses were ancient.”

“What dawned on me at a certain point,” she says, “was that the ‘security’ was real bullshit. Because if anyone had wanted to find out the links between all these things, it would have been really easy! We’d do things like take the garbage from a print run out to a Cub Foods dumpster so it wouldn’t be found in the daycare’s rubbish.”

"It dawned on me after many years that this was completely irrational. It was just part of the control thing. ‘Cause if you really wanted to keep things secret, you wouldn’t have a print shop in [the basement of] a daycare center.”

“It was kind of erratic security, but it served a purpose because you couldn’t really talk to anyone about what was going on.”

The beginning of the end came when Stein received a memo from P.O.O. instructing her to use her family connections to sell software in South Africa. Stein was already working as an official fundraiser for the ANC -and now the "O." was telling her to violate the worldwide economic sanctions on South Africa.

“That was one thing where I said ‘no.’ Here were my parents, who were old comrades of Nelson Mandela [who] had supported the struggle their whole lives, and he wanted me to break the sanctions! You can pull the wool over my eyes about a lot of stuff, but I knew about South Africa better than anyone else in the organization. It was just madness!”

“Those kind of things started adding up eventually. I always talk about the three things that finally helped me get out: the whole thing with the ANC was one.”

Working with the ANC had also forced Stein to relax some of the "O's" rigid security procedures. “In order to do that fundraising work, we had to exist publicly. So it was almost the opposite [of the "O."]. We had to have a phone number where people could reach us; we had to have a proper address in order to be registered as a 501 (C)3.”

After traveling to London to meet with her official contacts in the ANC, Stein became acutely aware of the contrast between the paranoia of the O. and the openness of the African National Congress –which was still officially banned in South Africa. “In fact, it was kind of odd, because we were so used to being underground and secret that when we were doing these fundraising letters, and the ANC wanted me to sign my name... I kind of balked.”

“I started wondering why was there this irrational security?” Seeing as how the ANC were conducting an actual guerilla campaign made Stein think that there must be something wrong:

“Because I knew that the South African security was real. And I could feel that what we were doing wasn’t real.”

“They were changing the world, but they still had a sense of humor, these ANC cadre! They worked really hard, but they also had a life. They had some personal autonomy. So I had this role model of an organization that was really revolutionary. And that wasn’t crazy like we were.”

The other major turning point came when the "O." purged all of the senior employees at their community daycare center. “My kids were at the daycare, and you know, kids are often a trigger for people to leave cults. Not always, sadly, but I really didn’t want my son to get screwed-over. So when I started seeing the care deteriorate... it upset me terribly.”

Upset about the changes, Stein broke ranks and started talking to “Julie” –her former roommate. “And we started talking about ‘Why are they doing this? Why are they getting rid of all the good workers? This is crazy!’ And it opened up a space for me and Julie to break the rules about not talking about things, because it seemed like my kid’s welfare was more important.”

“So we started talking, and slowly (as we started to build up trust) that led to us actually talking about the real issues. Like what the hell is going on in this crazy organization?!”

“Julie” was also talking to her husband. “What it did was kind of open up that space for free speech.”

Criticism of the organization was forbidden -it could get you purged. So the conversations had to be held in secret. “All you could criticize was other members,” says Stein. “That was encouraged. Like if I thought my husband didn’t do something right in the household, it was good for me to write up a criticism of him and send it to the center. I got praised for that.”

It was around this time that Stein first learned that “P.O.O.” was actually a man named Theo Smith. “That was a warning sign –if you don’t know who the leadership is.”

As a result of these “secret conversations,” Stein discovered that “everyone had their own imaginary version of who the leadership was -- because we didn’t actually know! So my ex-husband thought that they were a collective based in Oakland... And that’s not what it was. It was just one crazy guy.”

While her husband was sympathetic to many of Stein’s concerns, Theo had successfully turned him against her. Stein was now “the enemy.” She filed for a divorce.

“My now ex-husband -- who was also in the group – stayed a year longer than I did... So when I left, Theo told him to file for custody of the kids. Which made no sense in any way. We were very progressive parents. We always did everything 50-50. It made no sense for him to have full custody. It was clearly an attempt by Theo to keep the kids – and that’s very classic cult behavior: when one spouse leaves, they try to keep the kids.”

“I think that’s part of what helped my ex get out, ‘cause he really loved the kids... It was a line he wasn’t willing to cross. Because he knew that it was crazy.”

Stein formally left the "O." in 1991.

* * *

It took seven years for Alexandra Stein to recover from experiences in the "O." During that time, she began attending meetings of Free Minds, a support group for former members of political and religious cults. She became involved in anti-cult work and researching cults. And she began researching the history of the "O.," unearthing some rather unsavory details about the leader Theo Smith –who had killed a man and fled to Chicago.

In 1998, Stein was accepted into the Masters of Liberal Studies program at the University of Minnesota, “Which is one these slightly useless degrees – but the advantage is that it’s very open.”

"I talked my way in, ‘cause my first ever publication was in the ‘Cultic Studies’ journal, and it was an article called ‘Mothers and Cults,’” -one of the first scholarly articles on the subject. “So I had this peer reviewed article to my name, and with that I talked my way into the Masters of Liberal Studies program at the U, without an undergraduate degree, and without a high school diploma.”

In 2001, Stein was accepted into the doctoral program in the department of Sociology. And in 2002, she published her memoirs. “School’s been great,” she says.

In addition to her academic work, Stein has also been engaged in creative writing. “I try to have a light humorous side,” she says, “and a heavy side that studies totalitarianism and genocide.”

READ MORE ABOUT THE "O" in Co-op Wars

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