

The General Uprising

In 1973, when I moved to Somerville, the Vietnam War was raging, and debates about antiwar strategy, imperialism, Marxism were unending on the left. Acceptance of a diffusely Marxist framework, and frustration with the apparent stalemate of antiwar politics, led to widespread advocacy of local organizing of working-class communities and workplaces.

Back in the day, Davis Square was not yet populated by trendy young people and their favorite stores and restaurants. In the 1970s, before the subway was extended to the area, before the gentrification of Somerville, Davis Square was a seedy and sleepy commercial center of an almost all-white ethnic working-class community. Dollar stores, discount shoe stores, and dreary traditional bars occupied by a few all-day customers dominated the retail landscape. (That's not quite the whole story: there also was an Italian café and pastry shop where I spent a bit of time, and a meat market that still survives.)

Not long after arriving, I went to a community meeting about the schools. The city had failed to reach an agreement with the teachers' union but wanted the teachers to return to work without a contract. A frustrated young mother burst out with "you want your husband to have a contract, and you want your teachers to have a contract." It was a phrase that spoke of promises made and sometimes kept, of a once stable working-class existence that was about to fade away.

With a circle of friends and supporters, we held lengthy discussions about how to connect with the community, and how to introduce our broader radical perspectives into local politics. (About a year later we realized we were better writers than community organizers and launched the *Somerville Community News*.) We started by going to a meeting of a neighborhood association where there was a debate about plans for community development.

The featured speaker at the meeting was a caricature of a capitalist, talking loudly and self-importantly about the nine-story office building he proposed to build in Davis Square. At one point he took a break from showing off his architectural drawings to announce that there would be no loss in condemning parts of the neighborhood because it was so run down. Forgetting all our plans about how to gradually introduce ourselves and our views to the group, I stood up to object. I was new to the neighborhood, I said, but in walking over to the meeting I had been impressed at how many nice-looking houses there were around here; a few could use a coat of paint, but they looked well-cared for by their occupants.

My intervention might have reinforced the meeting's rejection of the office tower plans, although that was already fated to happen. Another effect of my remarks was that lots of the (predominantly older) people at the meeting started smiling at me and my friends. We went to a few more meetings, no sign of big issues or deep political conversations, but lots of smiles.

After a meeting, one of the silent smilers came up to me and said, "I think you'd be interested in my son's book." She handed me a copy of *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province*. "It's about the Vietnam war," she said, "but mostly it's about revolution." And smiled at me again.

Her son, Jeffrey Race, was an Army officer in Vietnam who learned to read and speak Vietnamese and later returned to graduate school to analyze the war. His thesis was that the Communists had largely won the war before the first shots were fired, based on their superior organization: active grassroots recruitment, land reform and tax policies that favored poor and middle-income peasants, and pathways

for promotion of village cadres to positions of higher authority and responsibility – none of which were matched by the pro-government forces. (Race has since become well-known in military circles as a contrarian critic of U.S. counterinsurgency strategies.)

Two things, above all, stuck with me from reading *War Comes to Long An*. One was a marvelous phrase. Writing as a dispassionate political scientist, not a partisan of either side, Race set up a formal parallel between the ideologies of the two sides. Yet this led him to conclude that the Communists' complex understanding of history, culture, and peasant society corresponded only to "blank areas of consciousness" among the government's supporters.

The second was a meditation on what kept the rebels going despite so many setbacks. More than once, U.S. bombing shattered their organization, killing more than half of their cadres. Yet they tirelessly rebuilt, reconnecting with villagers and recruiting new members. Their motivation, according to Race, relied on the "myth of the general uprising." One day, according to Communist doctrine, the U.S. and its puppet forces in Vietnam would lose the will to fight. The Vietnamese people would rise up, liberating larger and larger areas of the country, ultimately sweeping into Saigon and winning the final victory.

The myth of the general uprising was an impossible fantasy, Race wrote in 1972, albeit a success in motivating the endless struggle. The myth of the general uprising also turned out to be a remarkably accurate description of how the war finally ended just a few years later, in 1975.

I wonder if all of us who work for social change are living for some version of the myth of the general uprising. Decades of slow, small-scale organizing leads to one demoralizing defeat after another – until the tide turns to sudden victory. In civil rights, in women's rights, in acceptance of gay rights and gay marriage, successes have been rare and gradual, until the general uprising, the moment when success seems inevitable and rolls rapidly across the country.

From the outside, this might look like purely spontaneous change. But the generation or more of prior organization is crucial, even if it is defeated for years before it succeeds. Rosa Parks was not just a housewife who finally got fed up, as modern American folklore would have it. She was a long-time activist who attended the Highlander Folk School (an important training center for progressive Southern activists), and part of a group that met regularly to plan strategies for integration in Montgomery. The group decided that she was the perfect test case for the bus boycott.

Rosa Parks, the instant hero who led a general uprising, would have been impossible without Rosa Parks, the long-time activist who kept going for years without obvious, large-scale signs of success. Both sides of Rosa Parks are needed to sustain a movement for social change. The preparation for change is gradual and incremental; the accomplishment of change is often abrupt and episodic. What keeps us going until the next general uprising – and what will it change, when it occurs?