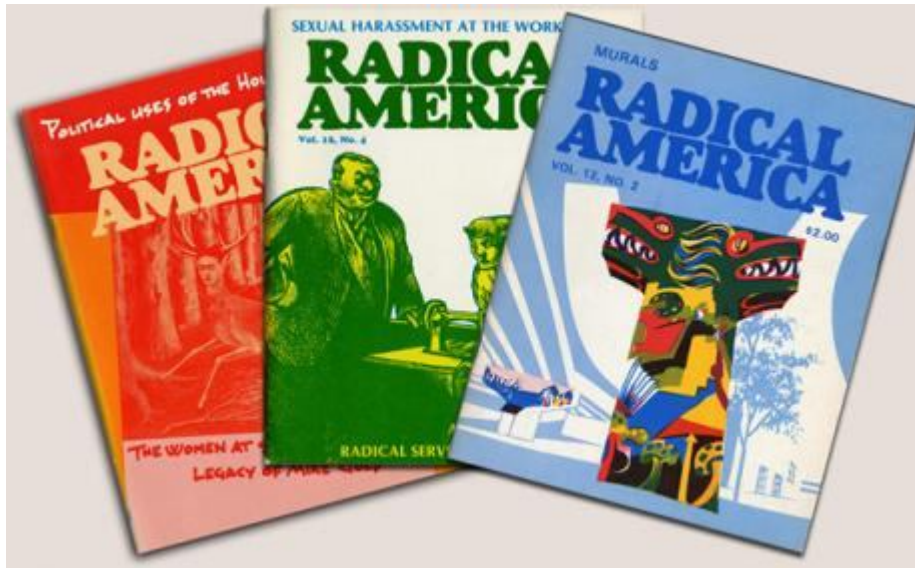


Radical America, 1967-1999



A history of the magazine [Radical America](#), which emerged out of, and eventually outlasted, Students For A Democratic Society.

Radical America was a product of the campus-based New Left of the late 1960s, specifically the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), but the magazine long outlived its seedbed. Its trajectory shows something about the effort to place an intellectual stamp on the radical impulses of the late twentieth century.

The SDS-connected Radical Education Project, formed in 1966, encouraged SDS members to start long-distance study groups that would explore topics relevant to the new radicalism. Paul Buhle, then a US history graduate student at the University of Connecticut, started one that he called American Radical History & Political Thought, exchanging letters with a handful of interested SDS members across the country. After a few months he got their cooperation in a mimeographed "journal" called *Radical America*, which seemingly exists now (2006) only in memory.

Paul and his wife, historian Mari Jo Buhle, took up residence at the University of Wisconsin in the fall of 1967. He recruited several members of the local SDS chapter to work on the fledgling journal and made it into a bimonthly, printed by volunteers in a 5½ x 8½ format on a small printing press owned by the Madison SDS chapter. Single copies sold for 50¢; subs were \$3, or \$2 for SDS national members. The first year's issues offered a miscellany of articles and documents having to do with the history of American radicalism. A frequent theme, however, was the very recent history of New Left organizing efforts — commentary by participants, as in Peter Wiley's article "Hazard, Ky.: Failure and Lessons" (Vol. 2 No. 1) or Richard Rothstein's "ERAP: Evolution of the Organizers" (Vol. 2 No. 2).

In mid-1968, Paul Buhle started to take the magazine in a different direction, emphasizing special themes and farming out some issues to groups of radically minded thinkers in other cities. (It was still produced in Madison, and a shifting group of local people helped with the production.) The first issue to mark the new trend was Vol. 2 No. 4 (July-August 1968), most of it devoted to historical and contemporary articles on Black liberation, laced with poetry and chosen mainly by historian George Rawick. Two issues later, the final 1968 issue (Vol. 2 No. 6), had as its theme "Radicalism and Culture," again with poetry mingled with the articles.

Nineteen sixty-nine, corresponding to Vol. 3 of *RA*, reflected the same trends. The January-February issue (No. 1) took the form of a comic book, edited by the underground cartoonist Gilbert Shelton, by far the all-time biggest seller of all *RA* issues. Other themes that year included working-class history (No. 2), Louis Althusser (No. 5), and youth culture (No. 6). This was the year that SDS split asunder at its July national convention in Chicago, soon marked in *RA* by the disappearance (in No. 6) of the special subscription rate for "SDS national members."

Rather than letting *Radical America* follow SDS to the grave, Buhle in 1970 committed a remarkable act of will by putting the journal on a nearly monthly basis and switching it almost entirely to special issues. The nine issues of 1970 (Vol. 4) had a range that can be readily seen by a visual tour of the covers: from Surrealism (No. 1) and Women's Liberation (No. 2) to Radical Historiography (No. 9). Among notable issues in-between were the first US translation of Guy Debord's Situationist document *Society of the Spectacle* (No. 5) and a bulky anthology of writings by the Caribbean Marxist C.L.R. James (No. 4).

All those issues except for the first one were printed by the Printing Co-op in Detroit, staffed by volunteers including especially extraordinarily dedicated couple Fredy and Lorraine Perlman, whose own freewheeling, multi-color libertarian books and pamphlets were distributed by *RA* along with other publications as part of an *RA* "pamphlet subscription," costing \$10/year instead of the now regular rate of \$5. (*Society of the Spectacle* was their own translation, and it was sent as a regular *RA* issue.)

Toward the end of 1970, Paul slowed down. He gave up the idea of a monthly and he recruited an editorial board that would take formal responsibility for the magazine, starting with Vol. 5 No. 1 (January-February 1971). This became the new modus operandi, even as it became clear that the Madison days were numbered — Paul and Mari Jo Buhle's decision that they would move to Boston in late summer meant that the journal would go there too, though only Paul Buhle and Jim O'Brien among the editors would be making the move. (The Buhles stayed in Boston, and Paul with the magazine, until mid-1973.)

The story of *Radical America* in its first decade in Boston could be told with four overlapping themes: history as a linchpin; the rise and fall of hopes for a rejuvenated working-class radicalism; the rise of feminism as a political theme for the journal; and an eclectic fumbling for articles that would offer one or another key to unlocking the radical potential of a large and complex society.

Besides Buhle and O'Brien, historians who were drawn to work on *RA* in its first (1971-72) year in Boston included Jim Green, Linda Gordon, Allen Hunter, Ellen DuBois (briefly, before moving to Buffalo), Frank Brodhead (an activist with a history PhD), and Margery Davies (a historical sociologist). Besides special issues devoted to labor history (Vol. 6 No. 6; Vol. 9 No. 4-5) there was an ongoing effort to probe the historical roots of current issues, for example in a widely quoted article by Green and Hunter on the background to the 1974 school-busing flareup in Boston, "Racism and Busing in Boston" (Vol. 8 No. 6).

The type of history most favored by the *RA* editors, especially in the early '70s, pertained to actions by working-class people. As the New Left imploded at the end of the 1960s, many activists found hope in the stirrings of workplace rebellion, especially among black and young white workers. A strike wave of unusual proportions in the spring of 1970s fed this hope. Many student activists sought to become organizers in blue-collar workplaces and in working-class neighborhoods, and *RA* sought to relate to this trend by holding out the hope of qualitatively new rebellions. By the end of the severe 1973-75 recession, however, it was becoming increasingly clear that this impulse was heading in familiar directions: the attainment of trade-union offices on the one hand and (not entirely separate) efforts to form

small Leninist parties. A gulf was opening between the ex-student working-class activists and the independent, intellectually oriented leftists attracted to *Radical America*.

Feminism was a theme that grew slowly in *RA* during the '70s — surprisingly, since two of the Madison issues (Vol. 4 No. 2 and Vol. 5 No. 4) had been pioneering looks at women's liberation and women's history, respectively. By about 1977, it was clear that feminism shared pride of place with working-class themes for the magazine. Linda Gordon and Allen Hunter's much-discussed article "Sex, Family, and the New Right: Anti-Feminism as a Political Force" (Vol. 11 No. 6 - Vol. 12 No. 1) was a landmark for *RA*, as was the journal's first article on gay/lesbian issues, a 1977 interview with Henry Hay on the origins of the Mattachine Society in Vol. 11 No. 4. By coincidence, Vol. 11 No. 3 was the last issue produced by the Printing Co-op in Detroit, as Fredy and Lorraine Perlman stepped aside (to focus on their own publications, under the imprint Black & Red) after seven years.

Radical America at the end of the '70s was an eclectic left publication, bound to no single strategy and certainly to no organization. Its editors looked for interesting materials that could in some way contribute insights or experiences to a "movement" that was more and more loosely defined. The July-August 1980 issue (Vol. 14 No. 4), the last one currently included in the on-line collection, illustrates this breadth. The articles ranged from an account of a daily newspaper produced by striking newspaper workers (in Madison, Wisconsin, recalling *RA*'s past) to an article on rock and roll, one on Marxism, feminism, and utopian socialism, and an article by British historian on a gay utopian writer, Edward Carpenter. The editors' introduction to the issue explained that in printing articles touching on utopianism, "We are printing them to show that present-day concerns with sexuality, domestic life, and the sterile cultures of advanced capitalism have a long history in our socialist past."

In the early 1980s the history emphasis that had been so prominent began to fade as individual historians left the editorial board over a five-year period, due to other priorities or moving out of town. The journal continued its openness and creativity; its very lack of predictability was possibly its greatest strength. In an evolving editorial board, two hard-working members, Marla Erlie and Margaret Cerullo, provided continuity and leadership. Over time, however, as the conservatism of the '80s began to seem like a long-term condition in the '90s, *RA*'s radical optimism came to ring hollow. Rising printing bills took its cost to readers long past the late-60s price of 50 cents per copy. Issues begin to stretch further and further apart. The final two issues carried the following telltale notations on their inside front covers: Vol. 26 No. 3, "July-September 1992 (published October 1997)" and Vol. 26 No. 4, "October-December 1992 (published June 1999)." After another long delay, *RA* closed its small office and ceased publication for good. It left behind a proud history of thought-provoking articles and a testament to a social movement that long outlived its initial organizational form, namely, Students for a Democratic Society.

Taken from [Brown University's Archive of RA](#)