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Ron Jacobs
The Way the Wind Blew: A History of the Weather Underground.
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by
Jill K. Silos
 University of New Hampshire (USA)

Of all the controversial and dramatic twists and turns of the New Left of the 1960s, few have been as shrouded in mystery as the emergence and activity of the Weather Underground, the group of alienated and violent American youth who rose in 1968 from the shattered fragments of the premier student left organization, Students for a Democratic Society, and plotted to bring revolution to the United States. That mystery is partly by the design of the activists themselves, who were self-styled guerrilla warriors against—and later fugitives from—mainstream American society and politics. It is also partly the result of the reluctance of historians to examine the Underground as a subject worthy of extensive study on its own: though generally addressed in larger histories of the 1960s, it has not really been subjected to many extensive treatments. Even James Miller's *Democracy is in the Streets*, a 1987 history of SDS, ends in 1969, and is really an intellectual biography of SDS ideologue and Chicago Conspiracy defendant Tom Hayden. The Weather Underground has, for all intents and purposes, remained underground as a subject of historical analysis.

In *The Way the Wind Blew: A History of the Weather Underground*, Ron Jacobs tries to fill this historiographical gap by providing a basic outline of the ideological developments and major events that define the history of the Weather Underground. The premise of his study is that the Underground has never been examined for its own sake as a distinct political development: compared to the earlier orientation of SDS, which was defined by the commitment to participatory democracy and non-violence heralded in its founding document, the *Port Huron Statement* of 1962, the Weather Underground's commitment to revolution and embrace of violence is always viewed within a declension thesis of sixties leftist development. In other words, Weather has been portrayed as a degeneration of those earlier goals and a symptom of everything that went wrong in the 1960s. To counter that assessment, Jacobs begins his study in 1968, on the eve of the SDS splintering in the aftermath of the Chicago Democratic Convention riots, when the Vietnam war had divided the nation to the point of armed battles between protesters and authorities in the streets of America.

The history of the Weather Underground is easily painted in broad outlines: first, the division within SDS was precipitated by the differences between two factions in the group. The Marxist-Leninist Progressive Labor Party (later known as PL) adhered to the belief that educating Americans about the imperialist nature of its society and foreign policy was the most effective means of creating change, but was challenged by a growing number of members who, drawing upon the theories of "repressive tolerance" articulated by Herbert Marcuse and admiring the cultural nationalism of the Black Panthers, argued that militant action was a more effective organizing tool because it revealed the oppression of the American system. By the middle of 1969, at the SDS National Convention, the proponents of action won out and expelled PL from the organization. Two new organizations, both named for influential articles written by activists, were born from that rift: Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) and Weatherman. According to Jacobs, Weatherman, named for an article written in the wake of the Columbia University uprising entitled "You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows" (after a Bob Dylan lyric), signaled a "new turn" in the history of the New Left. The bulk of Jacobs' study traces the progression of the Weatherman critique of the United States as a racist and imperialist nation and its application of this critique to its own organization, a process which led to a continual re-evaluation of both its politics and interpersonal relationships within the group. The result was an increasingly isolated and violently militant group, whose militancy alienated both potential members from the American left and older adherents. The group moved from attempting national demonstrations like the Chicago Days of Rage of 1969 to dividing into various small underground cells intent on bombing symbols of white oppression in the United States.

However, broad outlines are not enough to tell the story of the Weather Underground, and Jacobs, to his credit, refuses to retreat into a knee-jerk analysis of the Weather Underground's move toward violence as

the key to understanding the failure of the New Left. In fact, he refuses to delve into the relationship between the group and the increasingly splintered and ineffective left of the late 1960s and early 1970s, save to say that the group isolated itself through its policies and activities. Perhaps this omission occurs because Jacobs is really writing what might be called an "institutional history" of the group, explaining what happened to whom and when, including the various bombing attacks that wreaked havoc well into the 1970s. Accordingly, *The Way the Wind Blew* is a relatively useful account for those interested in the chronology and actions of the group, and will come in handy for those already familiar with larger history of the American left.

Despite this strength, however, Jacobs' study adds little to our understanding of the historical meaning and place of Weatherman, as Jacobs is so zealous in his desire to present the history of the Weather Underground on its own terms that he forsakes historical context. By starting the history of the Weather Underground in 1968, and barely mentioning the prior history of SDS, he manages to avoid portraying the group as the only cause of the weakening of the New Left. Indeed, he even glamorizes certain charismatic leaders: for example, Bernardine Dohrn and Brian Flanagan are pictured on the cover, in sunglasses on courthouse steps, and look more like movie stars than revolutionaries. Such a presentation raises many unanswered questions about the relationship between the Weather Underground and the media, not to mention the way the author relates to his subject. Another effect of this position is that Weather relationships with certain key groups like the Black Panthers suffer because we are not presented with an explanation of how the Panthers arrived at their ideological position of Black power and anti-imperialism. This, in turn, prevents any discussion of the similarities and differences of the Panthers and their Weather supporters.

But the real problem here is that the refusal to come to terms with what happened to the American left in light of that earlier idealism—including the emergence of extreme radicalism in the Weather Underground—leaves too much unsaid about the meaning of this group. If the Weather Underground was the moment when "SDS Turns Left," as Jacobs titles one of his chapters, from what was it turning? And what role did the relative success or failure of SDS' earlier philosophical position have in the ultimate division within the group and the creation of Weatherman? How can we know why the group was considered radical if we do not know what the other historical alternatives were? In short, without fully portraying the history of SDS and the student left, how is it possible to fully understand the ideological position and subsequent action of the Underground? This book is less a revision of the history of the Weather Underground than a refusal to deal with the implications of that history. Though *The Way the Wind Blew* is commendable for attempting a genuine understanding of Weather ideology instead of automatically dismissing that ideology as a simple-minded and careless result of youthful rebelliousness, Jacobs' refusal to deal in full with the effects that radicalism had on the left, and on mainstream American politics, results in an incomplete history.