

***The Young Lords:
Its Origins and Convergences with the Black Panther Party
By Johanna Fernandez***

Against the backdrop of America's spiraling urban crisis in the late 1960s, an unexpected cohort of young radicals unleashed a dramatic chain of urban guerilla protests that riveted the media and alarmed Mayors Richard Daley of Chicago and John V. Lindsay of New York. From garbage dumping demonstrations to a series of church and hospital occupations – termed “offensives” in deference to the *Tet* campaign of the Vietnamese – this small, interracial group exploded into the country's consciousness, staging its social grievances with infectious irreverence and distinctive imagination. They had enormous ideas, a flair for the dramatic, and a penchant for linking international crises with local concerns; within a few years this group of young men and women reshaped social protest and won an astounding number of victories. They called themselves the Young Lords.

The Young Lords Organization (YLO) was a Puerto Rican revolutionary nationalist group, born in the 1960's, that consciously fashioned itself after the Black Panther Party (BPP) and ardently championed the independence of Puerto Rico, America's last standing neo-colony. Legendary in movement circles, the history of this little known organization challenges dominant interpretations of the civil rights and black power movements, the U.S. urban crisis, and the character and complexity of the black Diaspora. With a formal leadership largely composed of afro-Latinos (especially in the New York chapter) and with one-quarter of its membership comprised of African Americans, YLP members launched one of the first Latino formations that: saw itself as part of the African Diaspora; that was instrumental in theorizing and identifying the structures of racism embedded in the culture, language, and history of Latin America and its institutions; and that would commit itself to the struggle against racism in the United States and insist that poor African Americans and Latinos shared common political and economic interests.

These predominantly first generation, poor and working class Puerto Rican movement mavericks led militant, community-based campaigns to alleviate the most visible manifestations of the new poverty in American cities: chronic unemployment, the intractable crisis of public health care, childhood lead poisoning, poor sanitation, drug addiction, hunger, racism, and police brutality. In so doing, the Young Lords articulated the highest aspirations and the humblest hopes of poor urban communities across the country and captured the imagination of cities like New York and Chicago. And in the course of just a few short years they grew from a little-known organization to the stuff of legend; in the process, their media-conscious urban guerrilla protests, combined with the group's multi-racial membership, redefined the character of protest, the color of politics, and the cadence of popular culture in the city.

The issues around which they built a local urban movement would become central in public policy debates during the 1980s and 1990s: a worsening healthcare crisis; the neighborhood consequences of deindustrialization and municipal budget cuts; the growing disrepair of American cities; the swelling incarceration of people who could not be employed by urban economies; and an overtly self-interested American hegemony and foreign policy.

Preoccupied with organizing the poorest sections of society, the Lords – like the Panthers – embraced what Karl Marx identified as the “lumpen proletariat,” the group of permanently unemployed and discouraged workers living on the margins of society, which through the group's Maoist interpretation was regarded as the social class with the greatest revolutionary potential. With this community support, and in many cases, participation, they organized a series of successful campaigns. In Chicago, the YLO is remembered for its occupation, in 1968, of the McCormick Theological Seminary, which it turned into a social service sanctuary for the poor, and for its activism against urban renewal in the Lincoln Park section of the city. The Chicago group is also important for its participation in the Rainbow Coalition, a class-based activist alliance led by the Chicago Black Panthers that also included the Young Patriots, a Chicago group of politicized white migrants from Appalachia.

One of the most significant aspects of the history of the YLO is its genesis. The Young Lords originally emerged in the tumult of Chicago in 1968 as a politicized gang. The Chicago Young Lords was one of numerous inner-city gangs, which in the 1960s relinquished its defensive competition over “turf” control and moved toward progressive and overtly political community organizing, partially as a result of organic grassroots leadership in inner-city neighborhoods and in particular the conscious political intervention of Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton. The primary architect of the Young Lords’ political conversion was the gang’s chairman Jose “Cha Cha” Jimenez. Like many black and Latino urban youth of his time, the Puerto Rican gang-leader-turned-activist was radicalized in prison. In prison, Jimenez read the story of religious transformation told by Thomas Merton in his best seller *Seven Storey Mountain* as well as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

These books were made available to him by a prison inmate and librarian who was a member of the Nation of Islam. Conversations about these books with fellow inmates in the atmosphere of possibility created by the social movements of the era awakened Jimenez to the world of political ideas. Upon release from prison Jimenez was targeted by a War on Poverty program designed to bridge his transition from jail to civilian life and help him find a job. He was also approached by one Pat Divine, a local activist who convinced Jimenez to join the struggle against urban renewal in the Lincoln Park section of Chicago where the Young Lords (gang) was active. During this time, Jimenez was also approached by Panther leader Fred Hampton and before long he began the Herculean process of redirecting the energies and focus of his gang and transforming the Young Lords into the Black Panther Party’s Puerto Rican counterpart.

In New York, where college education became available to racial minorities on a mass scale in the 1960s through pioneering programs at the City University of New York, the Young Lords Organization, later renamed the Young Lords Party (YLP) was initiated by politicized students in 1969. It flourished alongside the conflagrations of New York’s city and labor politics in the late 1960s. These men and women – full of passion, and barely adults – came of age during the racially divisive NYC teacher’s strike of 1968, the school decentralization movements, recurrent housing struggles, the welfare rights movement, the prison rebellions at the Tombs and Attica, a string of local street riots, and the rise of Puerto Ricans (and other Latinos) as an electoral force in the city.

In New York, the Young Lord’s most famous act was their audacious garbage dumping protests, which forced the city to conduct regular neighborhood garbage pick-ups. A quieter, but more significant victory was their anti-lead poisoning campaign which the *Journal of Public Health* deemed instrumental in the passage of anti-lead poisoning legislation in New York during the early 1970s. At Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx, the Young Lords were among the first activists to challenge the advent of draconian reductions in social spending and privatization policies in the public sector. In the spring and summer of 1970, the Young Lords’ efforts advanced swiftly from discreet one-on-one conversations with patients and employees concerning hospital conditions to a dramatic twelve-hour occupation of one of the hospital’s buildings, the Nurses Residence, a building that formed part of the Lincoln complex, which in an earlier era housed the first nursing school for black women in the United States and was a stop on the underground railroad.

In addition to carrying on a tradition of struggle going back to the Underground Railroad, at Lincoln, the Young Lords were also continuing the work of the BPP and various other activists who in the winter of 1969 spearheaded a battle over control of the Community Mental Health Clinic affiliated with Lincoln. Supported by a number of psychiatrists, psychologists, and other health professionals, a team of community mental health workers (some of whom were members of the BPP) seized the facility in an attempt to implement administrative changes which they believed would further democratize the program’s governing structure and meet its stated philosophy of making the community a partner in its own care.

The Young Lords' hospital occupation of July 1970 dramatized Lincoln's deplorable conditions and, as a result, the crisis at Lincoln Hospital became a major item in the city's political debates. The whirlwind of controversy that gripped the medical facility following the Young Lords' actions was recorded in over one hundred mainstream and alternative news articles. As a result, government officials were forced to find ways to improve care in the public hospitals. The Young Lords' actions eventually led to, among other victories, the creation of one of the principle acupuncture drug treatment centers in the western world.

While the Young Lords launched an impressive course of grassroots campaigns in the late sixties, the larger radical movement to which they belonged failed to coalesce around a broad campaign calling for wealth redistribution, the mass creation of jobs, and an extensive housing construction initiative. These fundamental changes would have been necessary to alter the structural problems of urban decline and economic inequality with which the movement was concerned. Moreover, the movement did not leverage the social power required to achieve these radical reforms.

The labor upsurge of the 1970s presented possibilities for a community and labor coalition that may have been capable of enacting more fundamental and lasting socioeconomic and political changes. In fact, the Young Lords and many other groups began to organize in workplaces during this period, but their efforts were stymied by the inexperience of the New Left and the advent of recession, which undermined the mass character of the movement.

Political limitations of the period notwithstanding, the Young Lords represents the best of sixties radicalism. Organizing with the benefit of years of movement experience, the bold confrontational style of Young Lords' campaigns were effective in achieving immediate local reforms. At their best, their community organizing campaigns attempted to extend the meaning of American democracy, especially as they put forth a new vision of society based on humane priorities.