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"The Way Change Happens": a talk with Sam Green

By **Jennie Rose**
May 25, 2004 - 11:46 AM PDT

"Objectivity is problematic."

At the crux of it, the Weather Underground's primary goal was to end the Vietnam War. Emulating the tactics used by the Black Panthers and the Sandinistas, the Weather Underground attempted to force an end to the war with street violence - an irony not lost on many people, then or now. In 1970, after they accidentally blew up a Manhattan townhouse with three of their own inside, the Weather Underground vowed to bomb only empty buildings. In the documentary *The Weather Underground*, the most self-critical of the Weathermen, Mark Rudd, brings to light the questions every radical should be asking: Are we creating a solution, or do we reflect the society we hate so much?

I recently spoke with **Sam Green**, co-director of the documentary with Bill Siegel, about dealing with the most sensitive of interviewees - those whose choices in life have been vexed by mistakes and, some might say, failures. Green says he is still most comfortable keeping a journalistic distance from his subjects and was first drawn to the story by its moral complexity. At the same time, Green's wrestling with questions of violence and terrorism continues long after finishing the film.

The Weather Underground was nominated for an Academy Award in 2003 in the Best Documentary category. Interestingly, that Oscar went to *The Fog of War*, **Errol Morris's** film dealing with the tortuous complexities of the same era.



Weathermen John Jacobs (left) and Terry Robbins (right) during the Days of Rage in Chicago, October 1969. Photo: David Fenton.

Has working on this film changed your position on violence?

My position hasn't really changed. I've always been drawn to that complex, somewhere-in-the-middle position. That's what we drew me to the story - that's what I still feel. Ultimately, I'm not 100 percent in the middle. I do feel more favorable [toward the Weather Underground] than less. Trying things and failing is often better than not trying at all. At the same time, I acknowledge I don't have an answer to a story that's unclear, and there's no right answer. So I don't want to hit anybody over the head with my own position.

Was there any one person working on the film who did most of the interviews?

It was mostly me, but Bill Siegel worked closer with some of the people, because he lives in Chicago where Bernadine Dorhn lives.

People like Larry King don't read anything about the people he interviews and he does it completely cold, which to me is crazy. You've got to do a lot of preparation. Also talk to people before actually doing the interview; that's my own personal way of doing it. We met with the different people tons of times and went

Jennie Rose

A San Francisco-based freelance writer, Jennie Rose is also a mom to one two-year-old rascal. In the last ten+ years, she has made a career out of having opinions. She often posts reviews at **Blogcritics**, a sinister cabal of bloggers.

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over a lot of things before we even did the interview, just to make them feel comfortable. It took a long time to get to a point where, a) they would even do an interview, but b) they would be comfortable enough to talk, and not be completely uptight. All of them are still a little tense in the interviews, but that's the nature of the story.

Beyond that, I have a few little things I try to do. There's another challenge when you're doing it on-camera. You want to bring out a good performance, almost like a director. You have to exaggerate your own energy level because they take their cues from you. Ask questions in a sort of amped up way. If you're quiet, they'll be quiet too. When people are on camera, and they just act normally, sometimes it seems very dead. You almost have to be a little more lively than normal just to look normal.

Did any angle in your interview questions have a deterministic effect on the answers you got?

That's another part of interviewing I find interesting, and something I always try to work hard on is how to ask a question to get a specific answer. With the documentary, you're not trying to get information out of people. What you're trying to get is feelings, stories, anecdotes, stuff like that. So you need to ask your questions in a specific way. It's funny because everyone reacts differently. Some people are very good at talking about their feelings. Some people just can't do it. So the way you ask the question sometimes determines the answer you're going to get. With this project and the interviews, the key to the story was the violence in Vietnam, and the violence in this country, and how it made the people feel. If they could articulate that, then their actions became more understandable. For them it's all very clear. Vietnam was horrible. They don't even need to explain it. But for people our age, or people who were younger, we don't know that. Trying to get them to articulate how that felt that was a challenge. Some people could do it. Mark Rudd, for instance, is really good at talking about that. He is used a lot in the film because he was able to express that in a compelling way. He's still really troubled about everything and was more critical.

Is there still an obligation in documentary to make motions toward objectivity?

At this point, everybody senses that objectivity is problematic. I teach a doc class at USF, and so, in going through the history, when you get to the 60s, people started to acknowledge that there's no real such thing as objectivity. I sometimes think, "Oh, ok, I'm going to drop this bomb on my students and tell them there's no such thing as objectivity, and they're like, 'Hell, we know that.'" I think that's something that everybody knows by now. One can give up on objectivity, but at the same time, at least with this story, you can still be as fair and as accurate as you can be. I felt a big responsibility to do that. That actually was a huge burden. In other films I've done - I did this film about this guy, *The Rainbow Man*. He's in prison, so in a way, I could say whatever I wanted and he'd never see it, so it didn't matter. But with this one, there were a lot of people who were very invested in the story. I felt a huge responsibility to be fair and accurate.



Police mug shot of Mark Rudd, 1969. Photo: Chicago Historical Society.

Did you ever want to ask the Weathermen if they felt they owed an apology for their actions?

I think people do want an apology. I want it from **Robert McNamara** [in *The Fog of War*] and people want it from the Weather Underground. Maybe it's not an apology they want, but a kind of contrition, an acknowledgement. Dorhn is aware of the fact that people want contrition, and she doesn't want to do it. She says, "When McNamara does it, maybe I'll do it." But some people, like Mark Rudd, were very open about their own self-criticism. If they can acknowledge that, they're more acceptable. So in a way, it's a smart thing to do, but at the same time, some people really don't want to. Some people don't react positively to Bernadine. They find her cold.

This film really resonates in post-9/11 America. Do you find yourself personally getting closer to the questions the film presents: What is violence? What is terrorism?

I think they're good questions and I have thought more about them, and my feelings and my own ideas have changed over time, but I still don't have any big answers. This is my own personal stuff. Part of what I take from the film is that nobody has a good answer, and everybody should do their own thing. I certainly feel much stronger that nonviolence is good, and that broad movements for change are good. I feel that a small group of people getting really radical is not the answer. More people of all ages and classes need to get together in a big movement, and that's the way change happens. The world has gotten so scary in the past couple of years, it's made me feel more strongly about the need to put things in a better direction if only out of self-defense. I don't want to live in a super-polluted, super-violent world. Before, it felt like a hobby to want to make the world better; now, it seems more urgent, a matter of self-defense.

The most important thing is to try to be effective. If going out and smashing Starbucks windows is going to accomplish something, I'm all for it. If it's going to alienate tons of people, it seems like a bad idea to me. What I take from the story is that, during that time, everybody thought they were completely right and that they knew how to make change. They thought that if everybody did what they thought was right, it would work, and they fought like crazy, ripped all their movements apart. To me, it's obvious now that nobody

knows the right answer. If they did, they'd be doing it, and it'd be working. Is the answer a mass march? Or running around with bandanas on your face breaking windows? If the people want to break windows, do it without taking over the peaceful march. I don't want to try to tell anybody what's right for them to do; I don't even quite know what's right for me to do. If people are humble about what they know, it'd work out for everybody.

Joan Didion wrote a small book about post-9/11 America called *Fixed Ideas* in which she talks about the fixed ideas of security and patriotism interfering with open dialogue about what's happened to us in this country.

That's what made me feel a high drive to finish the movie and get it out there. I do think there was a moment where a lot of things could be talked about, and that moment passed. We should have taken another road. I think there's a huge difference between what most people think and what the media talks about.

What are you working on now?

The theme of the next movie is about hope and idealism, utopia, and the limitations of human nature. I'm working on that, but it's still sprawling and messy right now. What I do is read a lot of books, talk to people and go to places. It's just research, which to me is one of the most fun things there is. I'm trying to go the city of Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. It was created in the 1950s. They came up with this idea to make a perfect city, a totally planned city in the middle of the Amazon. The thing is, nobody likes living there, because the idea that you can create a city from scratch is completely ridiculous. People like the messiness and organic nature of real cities. It's the intersection of noble impulse, the utopian imagination running up against reality and shortcomings of human nature.

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