

Buenos Aires 6th International Festival of Independent Cinema

Interview with Sam Green, co-director of *The Weather Underground*

David Walsh
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David Walsh spoke to Sam Green, co-director of the documentary on the Weather Underground, the US radical terrorist group in the 1970s, at the Buenos Aires film festival

David Walsh: What led you to make this particular film?

Sam Green: I had always known something about the Weather Underground. I think I read an article about them when I was a teenager. I grew up in Michigan in the 1980s. I had political and idealistic impulses as a teenager. But it was the '80s, and I looked around, nothing was happening. I was always curious as to how the '60s turned into the '80s.

About six years ago I was at the Library of Congress in D.C., I was doing research on another subject. I had time to kill, so I typed in Weather Underground on their database and I got this Senate report, 250 pages, that was done in 1975. I started going through it, and there was a section in the middle of photographs of all these people. I was very taken with the expressions on people's faces, but more than that, as I looked through it I realized that I knew one of the people. He lived in San Francisco, someone I knew vaguely.

I was surprised. I called him up. He said, 'Oh, you found out about my secret life.' And then I just started going to his house and talking to him. The more I learned, the more I felt it was a story that would resonate with people my age or younger. It raised complex questions, because I think trying to be a moral person or to do the right thing politically as a younger person is hard these days, it's so much more grey. People at that time had things they were inspired by, even though it sounds naïve now, Cuba, socialism, Third World revolution. There's nothing like that now.

So to me it seemed like a story that would evoke that kind of moral complexity. Also, it seemed like a way to pass on some of the history of that time, that younger people don't know anything about. Like the killing of Fred Hampton, COINTELPRO, the Attica uprising ...

DW: One can feel sympathy for the individuals, admire their courage, but their politics seem thoroughly threadbare. They never considered what a social revolution in America would really mean, its social basis, its program.

SG: It's a question people often ask after screenings, if the revolution had happened, what would they have done. To me, it's clear that was not very well thought out. It was more of a movement based on reaction to what this country was doing and just a desperate attempt to stop it and not necessarily a well thought out program of what to replace it with. The thing that is also striking to me is that if you look back everybody who thought they were right turned out to be wrong. Nobody had the answer. I think there's enough blame to go around.

There are a lot of lessons that I take personally from this history, and the main one is that ... at that time there were a lot of people who had a lot of strong feelings about what to do and everybody was convinced that they were right, and that led to a lot of sectarianism that ripped organizations apart, took up tons of people's time and energy, turned lots of people off to the movement and so I feel like thankfully younger people today are far from that kind of arrogance and sectarianism, and I think that's good. The truth is that everybody who thought they were right, none of them were right. And all that time spent fighting was a waste.

DW: The problem is that the historical issues raised

in that period were not resolved. The US is now in Iraq. American imperialism is proceeding along the same lines, creating a new disaster for the world and its own population.

SG: Their analysis of imperialism was pretty right on, it was just what to do about it. We're in Iraq thirty years later. Obviously, nobody had a good answer as to how to stop it.

DW: And there's Todd Gitlin, whose answer is to go back to the Democratic Party. This is bankrupt. You have a John Kerry now, who is a pro-war candidate.

SG: Although I've started to think of it more as defeating Bush, as opposed to supporting Kerry. My own personal thinking is that now is an opportunity to defeat Bush who, if elected, will only consolidate enormous amounts of power. That's all I'm interested in, defeating him, that's my personal opinion.

DW: Shared by many others, but not by us. Returning to the period in the film, were there strengths and weaknesses, were there things that repelled or fascinated you about the people, the period, the movements?

SG: In general, I was always drawn to the fact that there was a movement, or a multi-faceted movement, and a lot of energy and idealism. I was less drawn to the specific politics, because in a way that is relevant to the time and not to the present.

DW: The film does show how explosive the period was in the US.

SG: It seems to me that the version of the '60s that is now official history, that people absorb, is that the war was bad, everybody was a hippie and protested, the war stopped, and then ... Disco happened and everybody got jobs. To muddy those waters a little bit is good and to show things in their real complexity. A real wound opened in our society and it's still here. To understand the reality of what happened allows you to see the world more clearly.

DW: My criticism of the New Left is that it didn't deal with fundamental questions: the existence of the USSR, Stalinism, Trotskyism.

SG: I've edited a certain version of their politics. They saw the Soviet Union as just another imperialist power. I've edited the film for a 24-year-old who knows nothing about what happened or who has no background. The people in the film were critical, complaining that the film didn't go far enough into the

politics. They were closer to anarchists than anything else.

DW: What do you think about things? What do you think should be done?

SG: I think not telling people what to do comes out in the fact that I don't have any idea. I feel like it's important for younger people ... younger people are bombarded by so much crap from TV and the mainstream media, I think most young people don't grow up with any exposure of thinking critically about the US government and corporations. In the middle of editing this movie, I reread *1984*, which I'd read in high school but never since. I was amazed at how sophisticated it was. There's a quote in there, to paraphrase, whoever controls the present, controls the past, and whoever controls the past, controls the future. That seemed very appropriate, there's a lot there.

I do take that to heart, looking back and seeing how sure how everybody was, and everybody turned out to be wrong. I feel like that kind of surety is not an option now. The most I can do is try to be active and do things and be involved, and be a good person, and hopefully other people doing the same thing, it will add up and gel into something, and it'll become clearer what needs to be done. But I'm not going to fake it and adopt an ideology or analysis that doesn't fit because I want some answers. I think that leads to disastrous results.



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