THE HEALTH INITIATIVES OF THE YOUNG LORDS PARTY
How a group of 1960s radicals made health a revolutionary concern

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New Directions in American Health Care – Innovations from Home and Abroad

The Nurses' residence suddenly had the fantastic, intoxicating air of a liberated zone. The press was listening; the city was listening; and the Lords had risen up and were telling the stories of the women and children waiting endlessly in the clinic, the old folks dying for lack of a Cardiac Care Unit, the humiliation of the Emergency Room, the flies, the pain, the degradation. It felt good, it felt right, it felt righteous.

Fitzhugh Mullen, a resident at Lincoln Hospital during the takeover, July 14, 1970[1]

Dr. Fitzhugh Mullen's description of the 1970 takeover of Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx captures the excitement and significance of the demonstrations carried out by the Young Lords Party (1969-1972) staged to dramatize the paucity of service delivered to the Puerto Rican community. These actions most often centered on health care, as in this case where the dilapidated physical structure of Lincoln Hospital as well as the sub-standard health care provided there were at issue. By winning both left-wing radicals like Dr. Mullen, as well as a portion of the New York Puerto Rican community to their cause, these radical youth were the focus of media attention for their flamboyant identity politics and innovative tactics that called attention to the problems of urban poverty. Improving conditions at Lincoln Hospital was an example of their "service to the people" campaign; the takeover an example of the unorthodox tactics they used to achieve their goals.

The community organizing tactics of the Young Lords Party had three important features that contributed to its success: they made excellent use of oral and visual rhetoric to capture media attention and promote support for its initiatives. Secondly, the targets of the protests were chosen from the day-to- day obstacles experienced by many of the residents of Puerto Rican immigrant community. These most often related to unmet

health care needs, which became the unstated emblem of how poverty, racial prejudice and language barriers kept Puerto Ricans from obtaining basic necessities of urban life.[2] Thirdly, while their identity-politics could be described as Puerto Rican nationalist, the Young Lords prided themselves on their ability to work with diverse groups of people. These features allowed this group, short-lived and relatively sparse in number, the ability to effect health-related social change, as well as provide an example of successful community organizing for health issues. This paper will explore three of the Young Lords health initiatives, the Lead Offensive, the TB Offensive, and the Lincoln Offensive, to describe the ways in which the Lords' approach was successful, despite the unseemliness of a radical, paramilitary group acting as community leaders. It will further describe some of the lasting effects of these initiatives, and suggest a rationale for using a community approach to address present-day health issues.

Origins

The Young Lords Party (YLP) in New York fashioned itself after the Young Lords Organization (YLO) in Chicago. The Chicago group had been a street gang before its charismatic leader Jose "Cha Cha" Jimenez met Black Panther Fred Hampton in jail. Hampton encouraged Jimenez to organize a Panther-style organization within the Latino community. Upon his release in 1968, Jimenez formed the YLO using his former gang members as a base[3]. While the YLO eventually transformed from a gang into a community organization, the Young Lords Party in New York envisioned itself as a political organization similar to a Marxist-Leninist party from the start, with its goals articulated in a 13 point platform.

The Young Lords distinguished itself from a gang or non-political organization in several ways; one of them was by adopting a strict code of discipline for themselves and for all those working with them. This code included formal "Rules" which concerned responsibilities such as respecting the autonomy and security of the group, abstinence from drugs and alcohol while engaged in party business, as well as learning the safe handling of firearms and a commitment to political education.[4] There were informal social expectations for party members as well, and sexual endogamy within the Party was one of them[5]. Although not identified with the rebirth of feminism in the late 1960s or Woman's Health Movement, the Lords adopted a type of feminist politics regarding reproductive rights and women leadership that was very unusual for the time.

In many ways The Young Lords Party represented a hybrid of countercultural and identity- based politics. For instance, while it was a Puerto-Rican nationalist organization, as many as a third of the membership including a number of the leadership was not Puerto Rican. Secondly, unlike the Black Panther Party or the Young Lord Organization in Chicago, most founding Young Lords had been to college and met as students. Taking advantage of the New York State Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) of the mid- 1960s, many founding members met in the Sociedad de Albizu Campos at SUNY Old Westbury. One member, Juan Gonzalez had been a member of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at Columbia University and a leader in the 1968 strike there.[6]

After college the founders formed a political study group in East Harlem. After a trip to Chicago to meet Cha Cha Jimenez, they were impressed by a number of YLO projects such as their installation of a day care center in a church they had occupied, and

their founding a community health clinic[7]. Their desire to replicate these projects was a main impetus to form a branch of the YLO in New York. The YLO also served as a model for coalition building. Even while still a street gang; the Chicago YLO negotiated settlements between white and Latino gangs. Later, it formed an organization called the Rainbow Coalition, (bearing no relation to the group organized by Jesse Jackson 15 years later), made up of the YLO, the Black Panthers and a white Appalachian group called the Young Patriots[8]. Shortly after this trip the study group became the New York Branch of the Young Lords Organization and announced itself on July 26, 1969.

Within days the group organized its first action, the Garbage Offensive. After speaking with community members about most needed to change in their neighborhood, they decided to publicize the lack of sanitation services in East Harlem by setting uncollected garbage aflame in the middle of a street. This action received a lot of media attention, propelling the Young Lords into the national spotlight, and several individual Lords into the role of leaders of the Latino community.[9] The Lords were surprised to find that blocking traffic, even in one intersection of a relatively untrafficked neighborhood in New York City, was an effective strategy to gain the attention of city officials.[10] Most importantly, the garbage offensive succeeded in raising public awareness by linking insufficient garbage removal with health risks, such as the growth of vermin. As a result community groups as far away as Brooklyn began to launch their own garbage initiatives, giving the Young Lords visibility and credibility within the New York Puerto Rican community as well as in the media.[11]

The Lead Offensive

The second major campaign the Young Lords undertook was to combat lead poisoning. The ingestion of lead by children occurs primarily through eating paint chips or dust that falls to the floor. Although some children actually eat paint chips, others become poisoned by chewing on toys that have been on the floor, or sucking their thumb after crawling on the floor. Lead can flake off the wall in invisible, minute particles and mix with household dust. Those living in poverty are at increased risk for lead poisoning as dilapidated housing is the least likely to be freshly painted. Rates for high lead levels were as much as eight times higher in African American and Latino children.[12] The long term effects of lead poisoning include neurological, behavioral or psychological problems.

In the fall of 1969, Village Voice reporter Jack Newfield wrote a series of articles about the severe lead intoxication of a two-year old child named Gregory Franklin, who lived in East Harlem.[13] This child was hospitalized after becoming unconscious and was left with irreversible brain damage. Newfield suggested that a correlation between landlord neglect and plumbism existed, as close to one hundred housing violations remained unaddressed in the building in which Gregory Franklin and his family lived. This article captured the Lords attention.

While the Young Lords might have targeted neglectful landlords in an effort to pressure them to meet city codes regarding the painting of apartments, they instead chose to agitate for surveillance and detection of lead poisoning for children in East Harlem. Thirty Young Lords waged a sit-in in the office of Dr. David Harris, the Deputy Commissioner of the City Department of Health, and were able to secure 200 urinary

lead detection kits to conduct their own door to door screening campaign.[14] Teaming up with radical doctors at Metropolitan Hospital who trained the Lords in the use of the lead screening kits, they found that 20 of the 60 children they screened had positive tests.

These events fueled a rumor that the Department of Health had refused a donation of 40,000 lead screening kits from the Bio Rad Corporation that produced them, and therefore the New York City Department of Health did not care about screening children for lead poisoning. In fact, the refusal was the result of compelling evidence that Bio Rad product was inferior, but this was not publically known. Fuelled by the rumor, the Lords called for a comprehensive plan for the treatment and prevention of lead poisoning[15]. By coincidence, the City Health Commissioner at that time, Dr. Mary McLaughlin, happened to be an expert in the field of lead poisoning, and had long been frustrated by her inability to enact effective lead screening policies. After the Lords attracted national attention to this issue, she was able to use her influence to persuade the City Council to pass additional provisions for lead paint removal in city housing, and the New York City Health Department established a Bureau of Lead Poisoning Control[16]. While lead poisoning had become the focus of a number of community organizations by 1970, the Lords were still seen as pioneers for their role in garnering publicity at a crucial point in time.

The Tuberculosis Initiative

Tuberculosis is an infectious disease that is spread from person to person. Should an individual have active disease of the lung, it is highly contagious through speaking, coughing or singing. Individuals are more likely to become infected with tuberculosis if they have poor nutrition, poor ventilation in their homes, travel to or from countries with

high TB rates, or have close contact with those who have traveled. As a result, tuberculosis can be spread from country to country without detection.[17] Not surprisingly, the numbers of those infected with tuberculosis in poor immigrant neighborhoods are many times that of national rates.

The Young Lords viewed tuberculosis similarly to lead poisoning in that the impact of both diseases could be lessened, especially among poor people who are disproportionally affected, if the City expended the resources necessary for adequate screening and treatment. Drawing on their experience with the lead poisoning initiative, the Lords once again called upon progressive physicians to help obtain testing materials and teach them how to administer them.[18] Yet, should a test be positive, a chest x-ray is needed to confirm the presence of active disease. As the Lords conducted a pilot testing for tuberculosis, they found that those who needed confirmatory x-rays were often unable to obtain them. The New York City Department of Health leased a mobile truck that provided x-rays in neighborhoods with a high incidence of TB. Yet, this truck would come to high-risk neighborhoods only on alternate week days, and only between the hours of 12:00-6:00 p.m. These hours virtually excluded anyone who worked a traditional 40 hour work week.

The Lords decided to hijack the truck in an effort to provide services over longer periods of time to accommodate working people. On June 17, 1970, the Lords walked up to the mobile x-ray truck, stated their purpose and politely asked the technicians if would stay, which they did. They drove the van to Madison Avenue and 111th Street, across the street from their office[19]. Anticipating that the City would not want to be embarrassed once again by their calling attention to a neglected health program, the Lords had

contacted both the police and the press ahead of time. Within several hours of the seizure, the Lords had been given the authorization to operate the truck for twelve hours a day, seven days a week. The Department of Health even paid to have technicians staff the truck during the extended hours.[20]

The attention the Lords paid to health issues and their success in bringing the inadequacy of city services to light had earned them respect among some health officials as well as community members. With a number of high publicity successes in just one year, the Young Lords expanded their organization by opening offices in the Bronx and Lower East Side. In a short time later branches were opened in the New Jersey cities of Newark, Hoboken, Jersey City and Camden. An office in Philadelphia, and two in the Connecticut cities of New Haven and Bridgeport were eventually opened as well.[21] In late 1970, the Lords decided to make a larger leap and opened a branch in Puerto Rico. This has been seen as the first in a series of missteps that led to the eventual decline of the organization. Yet the move into the Bronx, a community which had, by 1960, surpassed East Harlem in numbers of Puerto Rican residents[22] proved to be an important move. They were able to join a very actively political health care community at Lincoln Hospital, which provided the basis for their most far reaching project, the Lincoln Offensive.

The Lincoln Offensive

Lincoln Hospital was the major health care center for the Puerto Rican community in the Bronx. Lincoln was built in 1899 as a charity hospital, and was acquired by the Department of Public Welfare of the City of New York in 1925.[23] Despite the post-war economic boom in health care, infrastructural upkeep was ignored

so that power outages, nonfunctioning elevators and lack of air conditioning in surgical suites were not uncommon. Worst of all, lead content in the walls of the pediatric and nursery walls were far above legally acceptable levels.[24] Dr. Mullen noted were sad irony that the walls of the pediatric ward contained more lead than the homes of some of the children they were treating for lead poisoning.[25]

In response to these conditions, two community organizations formed. The first, Health Revolutionary Union Movement (HRUM), was based on the Revolutionary Union Movements of Detroit automobile workers. This group was made up primarily of hospital workers of color throughout New York City and sought to combine traditional work place issues with a broader, class analysis[26]. The second, *Think Lincoln* Committee, formed in response to an initially unsuccessful sit-in by Puerto Rican political clubs and community groups to hire their choice for hospital administrator, Dr. Antero Lacot, a Puerto Rican gynecologist with a background in public health. *Think Lincoln* was made up not only of hospital employees, but of community members, HRUM and the Young Lords. Due to *Think Lincoln* Committee's continued agitation, Dr. Lacot was hired.[27]

The next concern of *Think Lincoln* was to combat the cutbacks Lincoln Hospital faced, which were thought to be the most severe in the city hospital system. *Think Lincoln* began to document the different ways the cutbacks would influence patient care by setting up a worker-patient complaint table in the emergency room. The worker-patient tables also negotiated patient complaints about hospital staff. *Think Lincoln* representatives addressed the issues on the spot with all affected parties, a strategy that often proved successful.[28]

Although the hospital administration had given *Think Lincoln* permission to staff tables within the hospital, they had done little else to address other *Think Lincoln* concerns, characterized as a list of demands. These demands included: the hospital must assure that doctors give humane treatment to patients; a new hospital must be constructed;, and no cutbacks in services or jobs. Other demands included free food distribution to patients waiting to be seen in the emergency room, and the immediate formation of a community –worker board.[29]

The Young Lords decided that direct action was needed to impress the hospital administration of the seriousness of the intentions of *Think Lincoln*. On July 14, 1970 150-200 militants led by the Young Lords donned long white lab coats to avoid suspicion and occupied the Nurses Residence of Lincoln Hospital. Once inside, The Young Lords set up screening clinics for anemia, lead poisoning and tuberculosis as well as a day care center and a classroom for political and health education.[30] Throughout the day they were joined by sympathetic hospital personnel, but the administration did not want this occupation to be prolonged. The police began to surround the hospital throughout the day, and by 5:00 in the afternoon, shortly after a Young Lord press conference called the activity a victory, it was clear that they would be forcefully removal from the hospital. The Young Lords, again wearing white lab coats, slipped into a crowd of departing sympathetic doctors.[31] Plans for building a new hospital were begun, and the new Lincoln was opened in 1976.

Within days of the Lincoln takeover, a woman named Carmen Rodriguez died at Lincoln Hospital while undergoing a second trimester abortion. This procedure happened to be the first death that occurred after New York State had legalized abortion. This

tragedy served to illustrate a concrete example of substandard health care at Lincoln Hospital. The community, convinced that the death was due to negligence, was furious. They pressured the hospital to hold a community hearing in order to question Lincoln physicians about the Rodriquez case as well as the standard of care in general.[32] The community was especially critical of the relationship of Lincoln Hospital with the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, which used Lincoln Hospital as a teaching site. While this relationship between Lincoln Hospital and the medical school gave the community access to some of the best specialty care, it also prioritized the needs of the students, interns and residents over those of patients. The hospital administration granted a hearing, but the tensions that these issues engendered were very high, little was accomplished and both physicians and community members left very angry.

The community meeting might have been seen as a complete failure, yet it sparked a set of events that did give the community some control. For instance, after the death of Carmen Rodriquez, the Young Lords and other activists called for the firing of the head of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Dr Joseph J. Smith. Either as an acknowledgement that his department needed to take responsibility for Ms. Rodriguez's death, or because he was intimidated by the direct confrontations of community groups in his office, Dr. Smith resigned.

Another result of the hearing was that a group of 30 doctors and residents who practiced at Lincoln and called themselves the "Pediatric Collective" went on strike over the Rodriguez incident, temporarily closing the OB/GYN department. The administration of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine fired all the participants of the strike, but that only angered administrators of the New York City Hospital System, which

then threatened to terminate their contract with the Medical School. As a termination of the contract would have resulted in Einstein losing $28 million dollars of residency training money, Einstein reinstated the physicians.[33] The end result of all the events connected with the community hearing might have been for naught, yet it was an important first step in establishing community control.[34] As community control was the ultimate aim of the health initiatives of the Young Lords, this was a victory. Yet the ultimate goal of establishment of community boards for health institutions never was met

Women's Health and the Young Lords Party

The Rodriguez tragedy forced the Young Lords to voice an opinion on the abortion issue. While they did not have a public position on abortion, The Lords developed a nuanced view, stemming from the strong presence of women leaders and the eventual integration of feminist politics into the Lords platform. Although some of the women membership participated in feminist actions, most did not identify with the women's movement. After the first anniversary of the founding of the Lords, women began to push for a presence on the Central Committee. The male leadership responded that women were not as "advanced politically" as were men, and therefore did not have the background and experience to be leaders.[35] Feeling that this was a chicken/egg dilemma, Young Lords Iris Morales and Denise Oliver initiated the formation of a woman's caucus so that women could educate themselves regarding political issues and acquire the knowledge necessary to assume leadership roles[36].

The woman's caucus developed a set of demands concerning women's ability to be full participants in the Party, as well as to include issues such as child care and reproductive rights into the platform. The women's caucus shaped the YLP's view that

abortion was both a woman's right, and also a result of the conditions of poverty which, in many instances, provided the incentive to unwillingly limit the number of children a woman might choose to bear. The women's caucus was among the first group to publicize the use of Puerto Rican women for the testing of new reproductive drugs and technologies by United States pharmaceutical companies. The YLP women's caucus also denounced sterilization campaigns waged against Puerto Rican women on the island in the previous decade[37].

What began as a response to a health tragedy involving a Puerto Rican woman, the YLP, led by the women's caucus, developed one of the most sophisticated positions regarding reproductive rights at the time: They advocated for abortion under community control, whereby women could truly have the right to chose if and when they would limit their fertility. They further demanded that to avoid a recurrence of the circumstances under which Carmen Rodriguez had died, abortion should be only one facet of health care, all of which accountable to the community[38]. This position stood in contrast to those of other nationalist political parties and groups, which saw limiting fertility in any way a genocidal action meant to limit the numbers of non-while people and therefore prohibited.

Legacy of the Young Lords

Through a colorful and sometimes problematic history, the Young Lords saw health care an organic part of social change. They fought for community control of the institutions that provided health care, and empowered Puerto Ricans to fight both for the resources and respect that good health care requires. Yet the legacy of the Young Lords remains in their vision, in the concrete changes they made, and in acceptability of militant

actions within a community that had been beleaguered by racism. After the organization underwent some extreme internal division, those remaining formed a left wing political party. Health care was a recurring theme in the work that continued after the demise of the organization. In the mid 1970s remaining members concentrated on workplace organizing in hospitals. At that time, the Lincoln Hospital Detox Center was founded by some former Young Lords who had become acupuncturists. Lincoln Detox grew into an important community-based alternative to standard methadone maintenance treatment for drug addiction by treating patients with acupuncture. In 1978, after eight years of operation, Mayor Edward Koch closed the center, charging that the center misused city funds.[39] Yet a clinic using acupuncture to treat drug addiction still exists at Lincoln, and former Lord Walter Bosque remains the director.

Perhaps the most important gain of the Lords was the linking access to fundamental services, including health care services with militancy. Central committee member Juan Gonzalez asserted, "While those [social service] agencies sought assistance from the government for Puerto Ricans, the Young Lords *demanded* that assistance as a right.[40] This confrontational approach, perhaps, was the most enduring gain of the Lords, as they played a critical role in the development of self-identity and radical politics within the Puerto Rican community.

The Young Lords also provide a model of community organizing that has seldom been replicated. Although health care did not play a large role in their written rhetoric, it was vitally important for their visual rhetoric, and provided the link needed to the Puerto Rican community as well as to the community at large. In staging actions that often lasted only a day or two, the Young Lords was able to attract media attention that

provided a critical in mobilizing key actors to their issues. Not surprisingly, a number of former Lords made their careers in journalism and media. The combination of intelligence, charisma, verve and discipline provided a strong base for a small, local group of young radicals to make a lasting impression on the public health of New York City.

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