The Lucy Parsons Center

James Herod

January 1999

The Red Book Store (now the Lucy Parsons Center) began in 1970 in Central Square, Cambridge. It moved a time or two in the first couple of years, before settling into what would be its home until 1983 in a large space on the corner of River and Pleasant streets in Cambridge. In 1983 the project moved to Jamaica Plain, Boston. It stayed there until May 1994, returning to Central Square, where it stayed four years until it was evicted so the building could be demolished. In May 1998 it moved into a temporary space in Davis Square, Somerville.

The project incorporated in 1971; in 1992 it re-incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation and changed its name to the Lucy Parsons Center.

The Red Book Store was a project of the movements of the sixties. Sixties activists were at that time (early and mid-seventies) busy setting up all kinds of "alternative institutions" like day care centers, neighborhood health clinics, food coops, so-called "underground" newspapers — and bookstores. Radical bookstores were springing up all over the country — Dorrwar bookstore in Providence, Rhode Island, for example, or Bound Together books in San Francisco, Food for Thought in Amherst, Massachusetts, Wooden Shoe in Philadelphia, Left Bank Books in Seattle, Fifth Estate in Detroit. Many underground newspapers had bookstores associated with them. These were not merely bookstores, of course. That is, they were not commercial projects; they were centers of activism. They were places where radicals gathered — for meetings, parties, film showings, discussions and lectures — or simply places where they could hang out.

Nor was this bookstore tradition new to the sixties. It has always been a part of the left, in one form or another. The Wobblies had their bookstores and reading rooms. Socialists and communists throughout the first half of the century maintained bookstores. When the revolts of the sixties broke out these institutions were invaluable resources for sixties radicals (for example, Jefferson bookstore, the communist-run bookstore in Union Square in New York City, or the bookstores of the Socialist Workers Party). Charles H. Kerr publishing house in Chicago should also be mentioned, America's oldest radical publishing house, founded in 1886 during the struggle for the eight-hour day (it was rejuvenated in the 1970s). Recently another variant of this long tradition seems to be emerging — the so-called "info-shops." Mostly anarchist or autonomist, and utilizing copy machines and computers more than ordinary bookstores, these projects are nevertheless similar in most respects to their predecessors, although they have perhaps more of a "clubhouse" atmosphere with less stress on reaching out to the general public. They are in no sense, though, a completely new phenomenon.

Red Book/Lucy Parsons Center has survived for thirty years. It has been truly a community project of Boston's radicals. Dozens and dozens of people have worked in the store over the years, mostly as volunteers, but some for pay (low pay). Boston's progressive community has rallied again and again to keep it in existence. It was never affiliated with any one party or group, but was an independent radical bookstore. Its bulletin boards and shelves were open to all the many groups in the radical movement, very broadly defined. It seriously tried to represent all tendencies on the left. It was eclectic. There was never a party line, which is not to say that there weren't changing emphases in different periods. And this is why it was such an exciting project, and so vibrant. Ideas were discussed there. There were almost always heated arguments going on. And there still are.

Nevertheless the project passed through phases. It's a shame there is so little documentation to help reconstruct these changing emphases. It's a shame also that no one thought to collect taped interviews as we went along, to build an oral history. But there was always so much work to do just to keep the project afloat. Radicals should probably start using oral histories more as we go along, considering that we don't have libraries, and that so many of our projects are so ephemeral, and that we often don't even have the resources to hang on to documents (but who would save the tapes?).

So very roughly, as an impression, the project was heavily Maoist at the beginning — Maoist in the New Left sense, that is, a militant wing of the New Left which had rediscovered Marxism and then the Chinese revolution and Mao. But even then the store had a section on anarchism. By the late seventies the project was predominantly feminist. This lasted roughly until the mid-eighties, at which time the collective had become truly eclectic, having a couple of staunch anarchists, a Leninist or two, feminists, progressive liberals, and so forth. By the late 1990s the collective had become predominantly anarchist, but with Marxists, feminists and progressives still represented. In a sense, then, the store has simply reflected the predominant emphases of Boston's radical community itself, which has passed through similar phases. This was possible because the project was a relatively open one, was always democratically organized, and thus changed as the activists surrounding it changed.

The subject categories of the bookstore however have remained fairly constant throughout its thirty year history, and reflect primarily the New Left's invention of Identity Politics and its focus on third world revolutions. (Some sections have grown or shrunk, depending on what was happening in the larger movement.) There were sections on Black Liberation, Women's Liberation, Gay and Lesbian Liberation, Children's Liberation, Imperialism, and area sections (Latin America, Middle East, Africa, etc.). There were in addition sections on anarchism, radical environmentalism, Marxism, radical social thought, progressive literature, workers and labor history, radical U.S. history, media, schools, ruling class institutions like the military and corporations, and so forth. In comparison with a mainstream bookstore, it was an education in itself just to walk into the store and be exposed to the different way of categorizing knowledge. (The identity categories later spread to mainstream stores, of course.)

The types of material stocked and sold in the store has also remained stable over the years. We have sold primarily books — new books (bought directly from the publishers or through a distributor), used books (mostly donated, but some bought at library sales or from other bookstores), and remainders or bargain books (bought from remainder houses). We have also sold a large number of magazines, journals and newspapers. Most of these we got through one or two distributors. But some of them we ordered directly from the publishers and some of them were

hand-delivered to the store by the publishers themselves (i.e., by local radical groups). We always maintained a large selection of radical posters for sale. Other items have included: bumperstickers, buttons, postcards, tee shirts, old magazines and journals (which had been donated to us), music and pamphlets (both new and used). There has usually been some free material put out, as well as large numbers of flyers about events, projects and groups around the city.

Redbook spawned two other projects, one of which still exists. The Prison Book Program began in the Redbook basement, but within a year or two incorporated independently as a non-profit organization in order to get grant money. It remained located at Redbook, though, and moved with the store to Jamaica Plain, where it still remains (as there was no suitable space when we moved back to Central Square). Angry Arts also began in Redbook's basement, with film showings there. It soon evolved into a separate project, sponsoring the showing of radical films around the city. It lasted until the mid-'80s, when attendance at the showings dropped so low that it just wasn't worth it to continue the project.

Except for the years 1992 to 1996, and 1999, there has always been some paid staff at the project. In the heydays of the '70s, when yearly sales could top $100,000, the project supported several full time employees. That was no longer possible by the mid-'80s, especially after the move to Jamaica Plain (where there were many fewer sales, due not only to the declining radical movement, but also to its isolated location in a residential neighborhood). Volunteers had always been a big part of the project, but by then it was mostly a volunteer-run project, with the assistance of one or two part-time paid staff. By 1992 it was no longer possible to have even part-time paid workers, so the project became entirely supported by volunteers until the summer of 1996, after the move back to Central Square, when a half-time project coordinator was hired.

So one tension has been between paid staff and volunteers. This tension was not as great as in some other projects, Dorrwar for example, where the tension between a stable core of three or four paid staff persons and a constantly changing large group of volunteers, was apparently quite severe. At Red Book, the turnover was so great among both paid staff and volunteers that such a split never had a chance to solidify. Everything was always in flux.

A second tension has been between "collective members" and volunteers. Throughout its entire history the project has been governed by a "collective" or steering committee. Not all volunteers were members of the collective. Most didn't want to be, and if they did it was not all that hard to join. The project has always been relatively open, but procedures for joining the "collective" have been sometimes looser and sometimes tighter. The "collective" was the decision-making body and set the policies for the project. Thus, even though volunteers might be putting in a lot of time in the project, they couldn't consider themselves members of the "collective." Volunteers were thus put into the position of being second-class members of the project. This situation was finally remedied in 1995 when it was decided that anyone volunteering automatically became a member of the collective after six weeks, with a right to come to Steering Committee meetings, unless asked to leave the project. Thus the tension between collective members and volunteers was finally resolved. Everyone working in the project was a member of the Lucy Parsons Center collective. But attendance at the steering committee meetings did not increase. The problem has always been to get people to come, not to keep them out. People are not pounding on the door demanding to work long hours for free to keep a little radical bookstore open.

Another problem soon arose however regarding membership in the collective. Although we had resolved the issue of entrance we had not solved the issue of exit, that is, when did members cease to have a right to come to the steering committee meetings and help make policy even

though they were no longer active in the project? This became an issue because during heated disputes members would reach back into the past for allies and get these people to come to a crucial meeting, even though they hadn't worked in the project for years, in order to strengthen their side of the dispute. This question was never resolved. We just sort of blundered along. Non-active ex-volunteers were never explicitly excluded from decision making. This is an indication of how incredibly open the project was. It did introduce an element of irresponsibility, though. Usually the ex-volunteers who were recruited back for a particular meeting were ill-informed about the issues, since they hadn't been there and had heard only one side of the dispute. A project like this cannot belong to everyone, to the community at large. It belongs to the people who are doing the work to keep it going. These people can set up advisory boards and establish all sorts of ties to the community at large, but policy making for the project rests with those who are doing it. Otherwise, they would most likely end up with a Board of Directors (outsiders, non-workers, non-activists), who would direct the project from afar, telling those who were doing the work what to do.

There was another "boundary" problem. Who decides which books and magazines are to be stocked in the store? Throughout most of its history there existed a fairly firm consensus about the boundaries of the "radical movement." There were always disputes of course. Russell Jacoby has written of his experience in the Red Book Store in the seventies, that although there was a large shelf of books on Albania, he could never get the collective to accept any anti-psychiatry books for sale in the store. At one point there was a long debate about whether to carry *Bad Attitude* or not, and in general what to do about magazines with explicit sexual content. Another ongoing dispute revolved around mainstream social science books. There would be a book with a great title, like "the causes of homelessness," but which would not contain a radical analysis of the problem, only a liberal one. People without a background in the critiques of mainstream social science that had emerged in the sixties would select these books and insist that they be stocked in the store. This problem got worse as the years passed and the cultural climate became predominantly right wing, with young people growing up thinking that to be liberal was radical, never having known anything else.

Nevertheless, until the mid-nineties no one had ever argued that there should be no boundaries to the project at all, and that the store should carry everything. At that time a couple of fanatic individualists working in the project insisted that the store should carry everything, conservative and liberal books, along with radical books. They said there should be no "censorship." Furthermore, they insisted that anyone working in the project had a right to select any book they wanted to, and that it was nobody's business which books anyone selected. Quite obviously, if this view had prevailed, it would have destroyed the project. The only reason why a radical bookstore is needed in the first place is because radical materials are excluded from mainstream stores, and increasingly so given the cancerous spread of super chain stores and the disappearance of independently owned bookstores.

Historically, at the Lucy Parsons Center (formerly Redbook), the content of the store has always been decided democratically by the collective. These issues were argued out in the steering committee. At one point, when the collective was small, with only about eight people, all the ordering was processed through the steering committee. That is, all orders for books and magazines were approved directly by the collective. At other times, with more people, acquisitions were divided up, either by publisher or section, but with final control, in the case of disputes, still

resting with the collective. The idea that it was a free-for-all, that "any thing goes," was a direct threat to the integrity of the project. Fortunately, this threat was defeated.

A further tension was between those who put a lot of time into the project, especially if they had been in the project a long time, and those who put in only a little time, or were new. Naturally, new volunteers had to learn the procedures and policies of the project from those who were already there. Naturally also, the few people who defined the project as their main political work had more at stake than those who only did a shift a week and came to an occasional meeting. This tension only became severe on a couple of occasions. By and large, most people realized that every decision could not be channeled through the steering committee; we would have been meeting for hours two or three times a week. It seems inevitable that the people who are putting in more time and effort will have more say. Nevertheless, this imbalance was always redressed at the Lucy Parsons Center by a really active and vigorous steering committee.

Why didn't we just have a set of bylaws to clarify all these issues? Good question. There may have been bylaws during the early years of the project. We have not been able to find out. But there certainly were none during the last fifteen years. At some point in the early nineties a member wrote up a set of draft bylaws, but they were never adopted. Why not? Who knows? The project was entering a period of extreme crisis. There always seemed to be more important things to deal with. At one steering committee meeting the idea of bylaws was discussed at some length, and it was decided that for the time being we would simply "fly by the seat of our pants." This meant that it was a self-governing project in the extreme; there was not even any commitment or obligation to a set of rules which we ourselves could have written. In a sense this was good. We took each issue as it came. We decided each case on its merits. One trouble with bylaws is that we tend to forget that we ourselves wrote them and that they can be changed. They are not eternal laws written in stone. Another problem is that bylaws are only as good as the people who are there to interpret, enforce and defend them. (And this holds for constitutions in general.) In retrospect however, given the extreme turnover in the project, it would probably have been better to have had bylaws. They would have provided more stability and continuity in the project.

It takes a lot of work to keep a bookstore open, especially a mostly volunteer-run bookstore. How to divide up this work was an ongoing issue. The best division of labor we ever had was in the mid-nineties, when there were about twenty-five people in the project. We picked thirteen or fourteen coordinators, covering bookkeeping, staff scheduling, book tabling, volunteer coordinating, acquisitions, magazines, fund-raising, publicity and promotion, used book donations, office and mail matters, store maintenance, inventory, and so forth. This system worked well for a year or two, but then people started moving away, the project lost energy, coordinating slots remained uncovered, and the whole system finally collapsed. Just keeping the store open, with someone behind the desk to handle sales, is already a tremendous task. During the Central Square years in the nineties, the store was open seven days a week, from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Saturday, and on Sundays from 12 noon to 5 p.m. With three hours shifts, we needed 20 people each week, at one shift apiece, to cover the hours. But of course this was only the beginning. Books and magazines had to be ordered and the orders processed, priced and shelved when they came in. The accounts had to be kept; taxes had to be paid; new volunteers had to be trained; prospective volunteers had to be called; book donations had to be sorted, priced and shelved; sections had to be periodically alphabetized; the store had to be cleaned; child care had on occasions to be provided during programs; book tables at events had to be organized; catalogs

from publishers had to be filed; remainders and used books had to be purchased; newsletters had to be written, printed and mailed; the mailing list had to be kept up to date; fundraising had to be done; unsold books and magazines had to be returned; publicity and promotion had to be carried out. And this was just the everyday work of the project. There still remained all the special projects we wanted to do, like guest speakers and film showings. It's a wonder the project has lasted thirty years.

Our four years in Central Square in the 1990s were fairly typical of the project's entire history, in terms of its programs and activities. The store space was made available to other groups as a place to meet. We organized a public lecture series in the local library. We sponsored talks in the store itself, and film showings, radio programs and book signings. Guests from abroad came and talked in the store. We organized benefits to raise money. We set up many book tables at events around town. We put out several newsletters. And of course we organized to try to stop the demolition of our building by greedy realtors and giant chain stores. This was all in addition to maintaining a really great offering of radical books and a first-rate magazine rack with over three hundred titles.

And then there were our dreams, projects we wanted to do, which had been on the drafting boards, sometimes for years, but which never saw the light of day. Actually, some of them were realized for short periods. We had a children's story hour for a summer. We had a lecture series for a while. Classes and seminars were occasionally conducted in the store. But we never did any publishing, and we never got the reference library organized. It had been our hope to archive a room full of rare radical books, magazines and pamphlets, and to make these available to the public for use in the store. We never had the resources to do this, although we were in a good position to acquire the materials. But we never did any systematic collecting. We were always so broke it was hard to hold back rare materials rather than sell them. Nevertheless, at the time of our eviction from Central Square in 1998, we deposited 105 boxes of materials in the Lucy Parsons Center Archive of the Literature of Liberation in the special collections library at Brown University. This was mostly old magazines and pamphlets. It is not exactly a collection, but more in the nature of left-overs, surplus or discards. But it is something, and there is much valuable and interesting material. Hopefully it will all be cataloged some day and made available to anyone interested.

As this article is being written, the Lucy Parsons Center is in transition. It was evicted from Central Square on May 1, 1998, so that the landlord could tear down the building and replace it with high-priced apartments. Lucy Parsons did not go quietly, serving as a focal point for a grassroots campaign against the demolition that obtained thousands of signatures on petitions, mobilized hundreds of people to appear and testify at public hearings on the project, and sued the city for violating open meeting and zoning laws and disregarding community concerns and evidence that the project would result in serious dislocation and harm to the neighborhood.

The Center is now in an interim space in Somerville's Davis Square, in a 300-square-foot room practically invisible from the street. While two dozen volunteers keep the Center open 75 hours a week, the limited space makes it impossible to host meetings and events or even to carry a reasonably comprehensive assortment of books, magazines and pamphlets. And the limited visibility means that we reach few of the dozens of people who used to browse on a daily basis (and the thousands more who passed by the informational flyers and displays in the front window). Although a tight real estate market has driven up rents, the Center is in the process of negotiating for a new home in a busy Boston commercial district that would once again offer sufficient

space for small meetings and events, alongside the Center's wide array of progressive books and journals. And ultimately, the Lucy Parsons Center hopes to acquire a building of its own which would offer offices, meeting rooms, a lending library and facilities for producing literature, in addition to the bookstore.

The Lucy Parsons Center has always been an outward-looking project, bringing a wide range of radical ideas not only to activists but to a general public. This commitment to reaching the uncommitted means that the Center operates quite differently from the typical info-shop. Throughout its three decades, the Center has always been located in high-traffic areas close by the subway, meeting the high rents by selling books and magazines (supplemented by the occasional benefit). The Center is open nine to 12 hours a day, and vigorously maintains a nonsectarian, nondogmatic approach. And the Center seeks to bridge the gaps between activists in different tendencies, and from different communities.

The name itself, the Lucy Parsons Center, was chosen to reflect this commitment. Lucy Parsons was a labor activist who worked with anarchists and communists. Of black and Mexican dissent, she fought the injustices of capitalism and the state for her entire life. Like its namesake, the Lucy Parsons Center actively reaches out to all the oppressed, with large sections devoted to women's, labor, indigenous and African-American struggles, as well as Spanish- and Creole-language titles. Anarchist and Marxist titles sit side by side, along with the full range of radical history and social thought. Children's and literature sections focus on the struggles of the oppressed for their liberation, but also celebrate the liberation of the imagination. And the front of the Center is devoted to leaflets, community newspapers and other free literature.

A project such as the Lucy Parsons Center cannot hope to bring about the social reorganization that is so urgently needed by itself, but it can provide a venue for discussion and reflection, for getting out ideas and exploring alternatives. As the realm of culture is increasingly industrialized and subsumed to corporate dictates, the Lucy Parsons Center remains a thorn in the side of the ruling class. It deprives them of total cultural hegemony. As long as it exists there is still a window open to another, better, world. It means that there is still hope, that our oppressors have still not managed to bury their detractors, despite their enormous firepower. Their project of total control of everything for the purpose of making profit is not only absurd, it is in fact impossible. Humans are simply too ornery for them ever to succeed.

James Herod
The Lucy Parsons Center
January 1999

usa.anarchistlibraries.net