

From Gang-bangers to Urban Revolutionaries: The Young Lords of Chicago

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You can arrest us,
You can burn us,
You can kill us,
But you can't stop us—Cha Cha Jiménez

The Young Lords was a flamboyant revolutionary Chicago-based group that was comprised mainly of second generation Puerto Ricans. Although the organization had a flair for the dramatic, its impact was felt far and wide. Very little of a scholarly nature has been written about this important piece of Illinois history, however. Most of what has been written is in the form of popular magazine articles and memoirs that lack the objectivity and rigor expected of a scholarly study.¹ This essay helps to fill that void. It addresses the origins of the Young Lords, the aims, inner-workings and objectives of the group, the impact the organization had on the Latino community, and the factors that contributed to the Lords' demise?²

Puerto Rico became an United States territory in 1898, after the Spanish-American War. It was a colony from 1898 until 1952, when it became a commonwealth. Immediately following the American acquisition, Puerto Ricans were in a state of limbo; they were neither citizens of the United States nor citizens of an independent nation. To make matters worse, the presence of American corporations on the island weakened Puerto Rico's economy.³ Consequently, many Puerto Ricans immigrated to the United States in search of better economic prospects. A number of Puerto Ricans ventured to Chicago. The first massive immigration of Puerto Ricans to the windy city occurred between 1950 and 1965.⁴

From the outset, most Puerto Ricans were forced to live in the most run-down sections of the city. Many of them settled in an area around Ohio to North Avenue with Clark Street as its nucleus. Among Puerto Ricans this barrio was known as "La Clark." Most of "La Clark" consisted of dilapidated hotels and mansions that were divided into kitchenette apartments and single rooms.⁵ Gambling, drugs, and prostitution were prevalent.

By 1970 nearly 250,000 Latinos lived in Chicago. Some were able to find decent-paying jobs, but changes in the labor force reduced the number of jobs available to those with low levels of education and limited skills. Those who were able to find work were often under paid.⁶ Employers could pay Puerto Ricans less because they were aware that many of them lacked

alternative employment prospects. Not only were these jobs low-paying, involving dirty and unsafe working conditions, but they were often temporary and had little advancement potential. According to the 1960 United States Census Report on the "Social and Economic Data for Persons of Puerto Rican Birth and Parentage," the majority were employed in the business sector as messengers and deliverymen or in stock rooms. Others found jobs as janitors and in restaurants as busboys and waiters.⁷

While Chicago in some ways offered opportunities to Puerto Ricans, discrimination thwarted their progress.⁸ In fact, throughout most of the twentieth century, most people of Spanish descent were relegated to the lowest paying and most menial jobs. And because Puerto Ricans were relatively small in population and did not vote in large numbers, they were unable to elect representation that could help provide better housing, more educational opportunities, and better paying jobs. Unlike other major cities such as New York where Puerto Ricans were able to elect some of their own into office as early as the 1930s, Puerto Ricans in Chicago had no political representation.⁹ Furthermore, with the exception of Los Caballeros de San Juan, there were no organizations that championed Puerto Rican causes.¹⁰ And, since Puerto Ricans wielded little political influence, those in power often overlooked their interests.

By 1966 things began to change. That summer, a White police officer shot Arcelis Cruz, an unarmed twenty year-old Puerto Rican man. Parts of the Puerto Rican community erupted. People looted and burned neighborhood businesses, particularly those that were White-owned. The disorder lasted three days. When it was over, sixteen persons were injured, forty-nine people were arrested, and over fifty buildings had been destroyed.¹¹ The events of 12, 13, and 14 June would serve as a turning point for many Puerto Ricans. The climate would set the stage for a more aggressive Puerto Rican Chicagoan, unafraid to confront the ruling elite and demand that the community's concerns be taken seriously. The Westtown community where the upheaval occurred would later be fertile recruiting ground for the Young Lords.

Orlando Davila and six others founded the Young Lords in Chicago in 1959.¹² Davila served as the Lords' chairman until the mid 1960s. For the first seven years they were just one of Chicago's many street gangs. They responded to White gang violence by forming a Puerto Rican gang for protection. Besides protecting Latinos from White bullies, the Lords fought for control of hangouts and turf.¹³ At one of the sessions that led to the founding of the gang, Davila asked Cha Cha Jiménez and several other youth to attend a meeting. Jiménez seemed uninterested at first, but later joined the gang as a rank and file member. He developed a reputation not

only for being tough, but also for being loyal. Whenever he was arrested, he refused to make any deals that involved incriminating other gang members. This won him respect within the gang community. By the time he was seventeen, he had risen to Chairman of the organization.¹⁴

Jiménez was born on 8 August 1948 in El Millon, a slum of Caguas, Puerto Rico.¹⁵ His mother Eugenia had been raised in a convent because her father was blind and unable to care for her. At the age of sixteen, she left the convent to marry Jiménez's father, Antonio. During her pregnancy, she went to Caguas to be near a doctor. Antonio Jiménez had already left to find a job in the United States; he was in a migrant camp near Boston when Jiménez was born.¹⁶ When Jiménez was two years old, his father earned enough money to send for him and his mother. They lived outside of Boston for a year, and then moved to Chicago. As a boy Jiménez was attracted to Chicago's mean streets. He was arrested numerous times. Although once an altar boy, his inability to stay out of trouble as he got older was the reason a judge ordered him deported to Puerto Rico for one year. When Jiménez returned to Chicago, he soon found himself in jail once again. This time, Jiménez spent time reading. He recalled, "I started reading in jail, and I guess it was Martin Luther King's books about changing things that started my political education."¹⁷ Jiménez also read about Malcolm X, the Massacre of Ponce, and don Albizu Campos.¹⁸

His thirst for knowledge led him to reflect on the plight of Puerto Ricans in the United States. He was shocked at the disproportionate number of people of color, especially Latinos, in America's jails and prisons.¹⁹ He began to understand that the real enemy was not other gangs like the Paragons or the Black Eagles but Mayor Richard Daley's administration and the United States government (whose imperial colonization policy had so ravaged Puerto Rico that many Puerto Rican families were forced to leave in search of a better life). A Young Lords field marshal said, for example, "What we had to realize was that it wasn't no good fightin' each other, what we were doing as a gang had to be done against the capitalist institutions that are oppressing us."²⁰

One institution that seemed to cause Latinos a great deal of anguish was the Chicago police department.²¹ As in many other major American cities, police harassment of minorities was an ongoing problem. Many Puerto Rican residents complained that the Chicago police did not treat residents like human beings but like animals and that their presence in the community made residents uneasy.

After Jiménez was released from jail, he developed a close friendship with Chicago Black Panther leader Fred Hampton. Hampton's

influence on Jiménez proved to be fundamental to the latter's political development.²² Not surprisingly, Jiménez held the Black Panthers in high regard. On one occasion, when asked about the Lords' affiliation with the Black Panther Party, Jiménez said, "we see and recognize the Black Panther Party as a vanguard revolutionary party. And we feel that as revolutionaries we should follow the vanguard party."²³

By 1967, Jiménez had changed the Lords' orientation from a street gang to an agent of social change. The conversion was a long arduous process. Although he was not able to get through to all of his fellow gang members, he did muster enough support to redirect its focus. In the process Jiménez changed the group's name from the Young Lords to the Young Lords Organization. The Lords' metamorphosis coincided with the mood of the late 1960s. The Black Power, Chicano, and Women's Liberation movements were in the early phases of their development and the anti-war movement was at its apex—all parts of the political context within which the Young Lords Organization emerged. The Lords' first order of business as a political organization was to negotiate a truce with some of Chicago's major gangs, convincing them to redirect their hostilities toward the agents of repression. Among the gangs that the Lords were able to influence was the Latin Kings, which was reputed to have a membership of three thousand, making it the city's largest gang.²⁴

The evolution of the Young Lords caught the attention of Latinos throughout the country. Jose Martinez, a member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), was intrigued by the Lords' transformation. At SDS's May 1969 convention in Chicago, Martinez met Jiménez and inquired about starting a chapter in New York.²⁵ With Jiménez's approval, Martinez returned to the Empire State and opened a branch of the Young Lords in East Harlem. In subsequent years other chapters sprouted in Boston, Bridgeport, New Haven, Philadelphia, Newark, New Jersey, and Puerto Rico. Like many radical organizations of color during the period, the Young Lords did not allow Whites to join. In the words of Young Lord Rafael Viera, "we refuse white people admittance into the YLO for the purpose that we are out there to serve the community, the Puerto Rican community. If white people want to serve their community then there is the Young Patriots in Yorkville or other respective white organizations."²⁶

Although Whites were prohibited from joining the organization, the Young Lords were not racists. In fact, their hope was that one day White revolutionaries would join them and Blacks in a collective struggle to liberate all oppressed people. One member explained, "what we are trying to destroy is not white people, but a system created by white people."²⁷ While the organization was overwhelmingly Puerto Rican, African Americans and

other Latinos were welcomed.²⁸ That Blacks would be permitted to join is not surprising. Both Blacks and Puerto Ricans share a common African historical background and both suffered from the American-American legacy of segregation and discrimination. Said one Young Lord, "before they called me spic they called me nigger."²⁹

At its peak the organization claimed to have one thousand members.³⁰ They ranged in age from children of twelve years to men and women in their early thirties. Men held nearly all of the leadership positions. However, women played an integral role in the organization's success. The Lords considered themselves full-time revolutionaries. Some decided against holding jobs in order to devote all of their time to organizing and serving the people. Individuals who made such sacrifices were given a per diem for meals and other essentials.³¹ The Young Lords Organization did not publicly reveal the size of its membership. To those who inquired, the Lords' standard reply was, "those who tell don't know and those who know don't tell."³²

The organization helped to support itself by selling the *YLO*, a monthly newspaper. The *YLO*, published in both Spanish and English, printed articles on local, national and international affairs. The Lords envisioned the newspaper as a tool that would help heighten the level of political consciousness within the Latino community. Since the paper was published only once a month, it could not sustain the organization financially. Hence, the Lords also sold posters and buttons and secured donations from philanthropists and local businesses.

The organizational hierarchy and structure of the Young Lords Organization in many ways paralleled those of the Black Panther Party. Members would report in and get their daily assignments from the Officer of the Day. The organization's governing body was called the Central Committee, a term traditionally associated with the communist movement. The committee was organized into ministerial divisions, with specific lines of authority and levels of responsibility. The positions included Chairman, Minister of Information, Minister of Education, Minister of Finance, Minister of Defense, Minister of Health, Chief of Staff, Minister of Economic Development, and Communications Deputy. From the outset, Jiménez delegated much of the leadership responsibility to his ministers to counteract the government's proclivity for targeting an organization's leader as a way of undermining its effectiveness. Jiménez surmised that, in the event of his arrest, the organization would be strong enough to function without him.

The Young Lords saw themselves as revolutionary nationalists even though many of their ideological mentors espoused an internationalist world view. Political education classes were held where members discussed

the works of Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Che Guevara, Karl Marx, and others. The purpose of these classes was to learn to apply theory to real world situations. In addition to setting up study groups, the Lords established classes in marital arts.

Although the organization did not have an official uniform, like the Black Panther Party or Us, the Young Lords wore a purple beret.³³ They devised a twelve-point program that appeared to be modeled after the Panthers and the Nation of Islam. It called for self-determination for all oppressed people, an education that reflected the Latino experience and, an end to capitalism.³⁴ The Lords called for the liberation of Puerto Ricans in America as well as in Puerto Rico. From their standpoint, Puerto Ricans on the island lived in an oppressive colony of the United States, while Puerto Ricans in America lived under conditions of internal colonialism. The Lords believed that armed struggle would probably and eventually be the only way to achieve liberation. Yet unlike the Panthers, guns were not a part of the Lords' program.³⁵ Said Jiménez, "we have to educate the people before we think about guns."³⁶ Unlike some earlier groups, the Lords did not believe in plebiscites, such as the one held in 1967 in Puerto Rico, in which only one percent of the voters expressed a desire for national independence over statehood or commonwealth status.³⁷ The Lords were in accord with nationalist groups in Puerto Rico that called for a boycott of the referendum. They argued that a combined program of education and direct struggle by Puerto Ricans could only gain national independence, and that the political aims must be accompanied by economic ones that would break American domination of the island.

It would take two years after its conversion before many Chicago residents would learn of the Young Lords. In April 1969, just as a national conclave of Presbyterian ministers convened in Texas, the Lords along with the Panthers, the Young Patriots, and the SDS moved to take over Presbyterian McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.³⁸ They entered the premises, barricaded the doors, and set up security with walkie-talkies. During the occupation the Young Lords publicized the city's attempts to displace Puerto Ricans from the Lincoln Park community and charged that the seminary was complicit in this displacement. The seminary's president, Arthur McKay, threatened that he was going to call the police to remove the Lords. Jiménez remembers, "we made it clear that no warrant to leave, no piece of paper was going to evict us."³⁹ Classes at the seminary were suspended for four days as the Young Lords' occupation of the campus lasted almost a week. The Young Lords demanded that the seminary provide funds for low-income housing in the community, a children's center, a cultural center for Latin Americans, and legal assistance."⁴⁰

When the media learned of the occupation, reporters rushed to the scene. Jiménez recalls,

McKay talked to the Board and dropped the charge, and we got a call from Texas saying we had got \$600,000 for low-income housing in Lincoln Park. The Board agreed to meet our demands for housing, that their financial records be open, that McCormick join to help community groups, that it publicly oppose the racist policies of Urban Renewal, and that it open its facilities to the use of the community. We were in the building for five days before we got that decision.⁴¹

The action was taken by the Lords primarily to dramatize the situation of the poor in Lincoln Park and to demand that McCormick Theological Seminary and other institutions get involved. The media exposure garnered inadvertently helped the Young Lords with recruitment. The incident appealed to some younger Puerto Ricans, as many of them had never witnessed such a bold political act. Shortly thereafter, the Young Lords Organization experienced a rise in membership.

The Young Lords Organization implemented a number of substantive community service projects aimed at meeting the needs of the people in Chicago's barrios and ghettos. They established a free breakfast program for children where the Puerto Rican national anthem was played each morning so that the children would stay connected to their culture. The Young Lords also set up a daycare center, much to the chagrin of some White residents and city officials. Leaders asked officials at the Armitage Avenue Methodist Church for permission to establish a daycare center, and although the minister of the church was receptive to the idea, the congregation was not.⁴² Unwilling to take no for an answer, the Lords occupied the church. The take-over had been preceded by a sit-in, which began 11 June 1969 and ended four days later with the occupation of the church. Many White residents of Lincoln Park opposed the idea of a daycare center and asked city inspectors to conduct an investigation of the site to determine if it would be in compliance with state regulations. Residents were hopeful that the inspectors' findings would cause the Lords to drop the idea. Indeed, inspectors found eleven violations. The total cost for correcting the violations was estimated at ten thousand dollars.⁴³ Undeterred, the Young Lords raised the money and opened the daycare center two months later.

One of the organization's most laudable efforts involved a plan to establish a "poor people's" housing project on the west side of Lincoln Park

near Larrabe and Eugene streets.⁴⁴ Knowing that the Department of Urban Renewal (DUR) had approved the construction of a housing plan there, the Young Lords proposed that forty percent of the units be reserved for low-income families. The organization also demanded that the rent be subsidized by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development under Section 8.⁴⁵

The Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council (LPCCC), a group of community residents named by Mayor Daley to oversee and approve government urban renewal in the community, countered the Lords' proposal with one of their own. The LPCCC'S plan, aimed primarily at middle-income families, called for setting aside only the Federal Housing Authority minimum of fifteen percent for low-income family units. After the announcement of this plan, the Lords vowed to disrupt any open meeting held by this group to seek support of its plan. In July 1969, several meetings were disrupted when boisterous Young Lords stormed the stage and refused to allow the agenda to be implemented.⁴⁶

On 11 February 1970 the Department of Urban Renewal rejected the poor people's plan. In an open meeting in the council chambers in city hall, the board turned down the bid to build a housing project for low-and moderate-income families. The DUR voted to award construction of a seventy-unit project, which provided fifteen percent of the housing for poor people. Pandemonium nearly broke out in the council chambers following the DUR's decision. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that policemen subdued one person after he leaped over a spectator's partition to reach the area where the board members were sitting.⁴⁷ Although the Young Lords' demands were not met, their confrontation with the Lincoln Park Conservation Community Council signaled a new response among Puerto Ricans to their housing situation.

Determined not to become disillusioned, the Young Lords immediately began work to secure a clinic for the community. The free Health Clinic, which opened in late February 1970, was staffed with doctors, nursing students, and other healthcare professionals. A third year medical student at Northwestern University supervised the clinic. The clinic served nearly fifty people every Saturday, with services from prenatal care to eye examinations.⁴⁸ At first some residents were reluctant to visit the clinic. They were still leery of the Lords' old gang image and were frightened by what they read in the newspapers. Recognizing their credibility problem, the Young Lords started canvassing door-to-door, asking residents if anyone needed medical care and making arrangements for them to go to the clinic. If the people failed to appear, they were sent a follow-up letter inviting them to visit the clinic. Some of the time, members of the Health Ministry and

doctors would make house calls, especially for those whose mobility was restricted.

Initially Grant Hospital (an area hospital) agreed to provide free follow-up examinations upon referral by the clinic's doctors. But the hospital soon began billing the clinic patients and initiating collection procedures. Consequently, the Lords severed its relationship with the hospital. By that time, however, the Lords had earned the trust of the people and were able to increase the level of its services in order to meet the community's growing needs. Through the Health Clinic the Lords were able to strengthen their bond with the community and to expose the inadequacies of the established social service institutions. The Health Clinic proved to be the most successful organizing tool for the Lords. Other community service activities included neighborhood clean-ups and free clothing drives. The Lords also pushed for bilingual education in public schools.

In addition to the tangible benefits that the Young Lords Organization provided, the Lords also played an important symbolic role for Puerto Ricans in Chicago. According to one member of the organization, before the Young Lords Organization was founded, Puerto Ricans used to walk with their heads down. Puerto Ricans had been socialized into being docile and submissive. Said another Young Lord, "from day one Puerto Ricans were told that Puerto Rico was small and the United States was big; Puerto Rico was poor and the United States was rich. Puerto Rico was weak and the United States was strong."⁴⁹ It is no wonder that, when many Puerto Ricans migrated to the states, they arrived with something of an inferiority complex.⁵⁰

In striving for Puerto Rican equality, the Lords helped to instill in Puerto Ricans a sense of self-worth and pride in their heritage and culture. Marina Roseman said, "the Young Lords provided a rite of passage for a generation of politically conscious young people."⁵¹ Full equality for the Lords was not simply about acquiring material benefits; it was also about dignity, integrity and self-respect for a people that had historically been consigned to an inferior place by many Whites. The Lords filled a leadership vacuum that seemingly could not be filled by any other organization. They risked their lives in the struggle for Puerto Rican self-determination and, in the process, they became folk heroes to some of the city's Latino residents.⁵²

The Young Lords were in the process of setting up a free day care center and a substance abuse program when they were met with systematic repression by Mayor Daley's administration.⁵³ Although the Young Lords were able to put the daycare facility in place, the drug program never materialized. Daley apparently believed that the Young Lords stood in the way of his plans for urban renewal. In part, because he was receiving funds from

the federal government, Daley could not allow representatives from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to be intimidated by menacing-looking Young Lords who opposed his scheme for urban renewal. Hence, when the Young Lords began holding rallies and demonstrations in protest of Daley's plans, he called a press conference and announced a "War on Gangs." Daley proposed to put one thousand more police officers on the streets by the following year.⁵⁴ As part of this initiative the Gang Intelligence Unit (GIU) increased its number of officers from thirty-seven to two hundred.

Jiménez appeared to be the focus of Daley's GIU. On one occasion, in January 1969, Jiménez was standing on a street corner explaining urban renewal to a crowd of people when two policemen from the GIU drove up and ordered him to get into the car. "Am I under arrest?" Jiménez asked. "No, we just want to talk with you," replied an officer.⁵⁵ At the police station, the officers kept Jiménez for two hours while they perused their files for warrants. The officers reminded Jiménez of his record and advised him to stop his political activities. Jiménez replied that he did not see anything illegal about his activism. He had been put in jail before for stealing from his people. If he had to go to jail now for helping his people, then he would do so. The police used two warrants from 1967 to arrest Jiménez. He was released on bond a week later, but the harassment continued.

Shortly thereafter Jiménez was arrested again, along with twelve others, at a welfare demonstration and charged with "mob action." Of the thirteen arrested, Jiménez was the only one indicted. The arrests and indictments continued through 1969 and 1970. By mid 1970 Jiménez had been arrested eighteen times.⁵⁶ Because he had numerous cases against him, he not only had to appear in court three to four times a week, but he had to appear in different courts simultaneously. Jiménez's attorneys informed the court that he would be appearing late, the judge issued a warrant for his arrest. While it appears that Jiménez was unfairly singled out by law enforcement, there were at least two occasions where he was found to be in possession of marijuana. And on another occasion Jiménez was arrested for stealing lumber from a construction site.⁵⁷ Initially, he claimed that he did not steal the lumber. However, his actions belied those of an innocent man when he jumped bail and disappeared for over a year. Jiménez eventually turned himself in during an emotional ceremony at the nineteenth precinct. He was sentenced to nine months in jail for theft. While it does appear that Jiménez was subjected to police harassment, some of his troubles were clearly self-initiated.

At any rate, Jiménez was not the only one subjected to Daley's repressive tactics. Several members of the Central Committee received four

to five indictments for various offenses. Some of the Young Lords supporters, especially those who protested Daley's urban renewal, were also harassed. Members of the "Red Squad" photographed people from their squad cars and later visited them at their homes.⁵⁸ Police stopped and questioned people who wore buttons distributed by the Young Lords, such as one that read "Tengo Puerto Rico en mi Corazon" ("I have Puerto Rico in my heart.") Intelligence files were kept on some barrio residents. Oftentimes, anybody from the community who went to a meeting was labled as an activist by the police.⁵⁹

Perhaps the most crushing blow dealt the Young Lords occurred in May 1969. On the night of the 4 May the Lords were hosting a party as part of their fundraising activities when a White plain-clothes off-duty police officer entered the premises, ostensibly because of the loud music. What transpired next is murky. The Lords claimed that officer Robert Lamb shot and killed Manuel Ramos in cold blood and wounded another Lord.⁶⁰ Ramos had been one of the most dedicated members of the organization. The Lords claimed that the shooting was unprovoked. When uniformed officers arrived on the scene, Lamb pointed out four of the Lords who were then arrested. Lamb claimed that Ramos reached for his gun, causing him to fire in self-defense. The Lords claimed that Ramos was peacefully trying to break up a heated argument between Lamb and another person. What actually happened is still a matter for debate. What is clear is that government repression took its toll on the Young Lords Organization. Some argue that the Young Lords were targeted because they were associated with Puerto Rico's independence movement. In their book, *The Cointelpro Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States*, Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall show that the independence movement for Puerto Rico was under surveillance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).⁶¹ Former Young Lord Iris Morales recounts how police and federal agents would come to their homes at odd hours and question them about their views on Puerto Rican independence.⁶²

As far as the city and the federal governments were concerned, the Lords were subversive and criminal. Consequently, the police and the FBI infiltrated the organization with the intention of destroying it from within. In addition, group leaders were harassed, beaten, and jailed, disrupting the organization's day-to-day operations. The main tactic used against the Lords was to arrest its members so that the organization would have to expend its resources on legal assistance and bail. Anthony Oberschall underscores this point when he writes "the government's strategy appeared to be to tie down movement leaders in costly and time consuming legal battles that would impede their activities and put a tremendous drain on

financial resources regardless of whether the government would be successful in court."⁶³ The systematic arresting of Young Lords also served to discourage potential recruits.

Another way in which the government sought to neutralize the Lords was to intentionally misrepresent the ideology and intentions of the group. Local politicians such as Daley, Alderman George McCutcheon, State Attorney Edward Hanrahan, as well as certain segments of the news media, tried to portray the Lords as a group of rabble-rousing vandals. They attempted to manipulate Chicago's residents so that they would ignore the message that the Lords were trying to get out, and distrust and refuse to be moved by their rhetoric. Some argue that if the government could convince the public that left-wing ideologies were destructive and un-American, then dissident groups such as the Young Lords would gain fewer adherents and eventually fizzle out. The idea that a form of repression could be ideological has its major expositor in the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci who maintained that remain in power not only do so by force, but also by developing a certain set of ideas that become part of the culture, thereby making their rule seem just and normal.⁶⁴

In the Young Lords' case, police were known to spread erroneous information about the group as a way of driving away sympathizers. In *The Police and the Ghetto*, J. C. Cooper notes that "undercover police officers were responsible for feeding the news media discolored information about radical groups; with the result that to this day, most Americans do not know the message that some of these groups were trying to deliver."⁶⁵ In the beginning, law enforcement tried to paint the Lords as Communists and unpatriotic, which were considered serious offenses at that time. Later, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover would try to convince many that the Lords were the Latino version of the Weather Underground, a White terrorist group known for its use of explosives.

Discouraging employers from hiring members of the Young Lords was another way that law enforcement tried to derail the Young Lords Organization.⁶⁶ Again, this tactic scared away potential recruits. Moreover, it proved a major hindrance to Lord members with families to support. Given the Young Lords long-time reputation as a street gang one can understand why the government may have felt compelled to investigate them. However, the "do whatever it takes to get them" attitude taken by various government agencies resulted in a violation of basic civil liberties.

By 1971 the organization's demise was in full swing. Aside from government repression, youthful inexperience led to errors in judgment. The Lords lacked discipline. One Young Lord complained that some members would consistently show up late for meetings, spend too much

time hanging out on the street instead of organizing, and allow old programs to fall by the wayside when a new one caught their interest.⁶⁷ Moreover, the organization developed an infatuation with ideological refinement. Originally built upon the concept of direct community action, the Lords became preoccupied with theory at the expense of their community service projects. This point is made abundantly clear in a 1969 interview of Jiménez who mentioned on several occasions, "The Young Lords are going to try to get a little more ideology. We have to do this to educate the Latin community, not just Puerto Ricans, but also Chicanos, Cubans, South Americans, the whole Latin scene."⁶⁸ Elaborate socialist ideas meant very little to the people whose immediate concerns were food, shelter, and clothing.

For the poor and disenfranchised, goals of social justice needed to be straightforward and immediately achievable. The Lords made the critical mistake of straying from immediate and foreseeable goals for the sake of theoretical development.⁶⁹ In the midst of the Black Power Movement, the Vietnam War, and liberation movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the Young Lords Organization was born. Within two years, the Lords had become one of the most widely-known radical groups in America, let alone Chicago. The organization consisted of young people who, through direct action, made an impact on the conditions and, more importantly, the consciousness of the Latino community.

To achieve what the Lords did in such a short time (1967-1972) required an unwavering desire and steadfast commitment. The leading activities undertaken by the Young Lords were designed to thwart Mayor Daley's plans to displace segments of the Puerto Rican community under the guise of urban renewal. The Lords' approach was based on the premise that the most powerful resource that they possessed was their ability to cause trouble—to disrupt institutions of the established system and produce political reverberations in order to heighten awareness and bring attention to the issues, thus forcing the authorities to respond. For the poor who attempt to initiate change, disruption is often their only recourse.⁷⁰

The Lords instilled a sense of pride in many Puerto Ricans. And although the Young Lords Organization was relatively small in membership, the impact made by the group was in some ways immeasurable. They demonstrated that an organization does not have to be large in size in order to make a big and far reaching impact. Unfortunately, in the end the Young Lords Organization fell victim to many of the same problems that afflicted other left wing groups. The irony is that one of the Lords' mantras was to avoid repeating the mistakes that other groups had made. Yet, one of the Lords' most costly mistakes was to lose touch with the community. Perhaps

the Lord's failed to realize that the success of an organization is largely predicated on the support of the people that it claims to represent.

Despite the Young Lords' failures one could argue that the organization laid the groundwork for a new kind of Puerto Rican—a less passive generation willing to bring about faster and more substantive change. As a result, Young Lord chapters were formed in various parts of the country. These chapters became a vehicle for the political maturation of a sector of second and third generation Puerto Ricans. The impact of the Young Lords is also evident in the area of electoral politics and contemporary grassroots activism. For example, until the 1970s Latinos had been effectively kept out of Chicago politics. By 1975 three Latinos had been elected to public office. Since that time Latinos have been elected to a variety of local offices throughout the city. Organizations such as the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and the Centro Cultural Segundo Ruiz Belvis, the Westtown Concerned Citizens Coalition and the creation of Puerto Rican Students Unions are just a few examples of groups that drew inspiration from the dissident politics of the Young Lords. These endeavors serve to remind us of the continuing legacy of the Young Lords Organization. Surely, the voice of the Young Lords was not the first time that the clamor of Puerto Rican protest had been heard, but it was certainly the first time it reached a national audience.

Notes

1 Pablo Guzman, "A Lord of the Barrio," *Village Voice* 21 March 1995: 1-14; Frank Browning, "From Rumble to Revolution: The Young Lords." *Ramparts* 9 (1970-1971), 19-25.

2 "Young Lords" and "Lords" are used interchangeably to avoid repetition.

3 Judson L. Jeffries, "The New York State Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus, 1970-1988." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 24 (January 2000), 7-40.

4 Felix Padillo, *Puerto Rican Chicago* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 21.

5 Felix Padillo, *Puerto Rican Chicago* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

6 Ibid.

7 U.S. Census, *Economic Characteristics of Persons of Puerto Rican Birth and Parentage for Selected Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas, Chicago, IL: 1960*, Table 13, 100.

8 Sam King, "Puerto Ricans are Eager to Work, Want No Handouts." *Chicago Daily News*, 11 August 1959, 6.

- 9 Judith Ann Stewart, *NYS Black and Puerto Rican Legislators: 1917-1977* (New York: New York State Legislative Library, 1977).
- 10 Los Caballeros de San Juan, the first major Puerto Rican community organization was chartered in 1954 in the state of Illinois as a fraternal and civic entity for Spanish-speaking men. The organization worked to "cleanse" the stigma of an oppressed minority status. Los Caballeros hoped to accomplish this by relying on the assimilationist approach, which in the long run, resulted in very little success and a great deal of frustration for the Puerto Rican masses. For more detail see Felix Padillo, *Puerto Rican Chicago* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).
- 11 Felix Padilla, *Puerto Rican Chicago* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 146.
- 12 Hilda Vasquez Ignatin, "Young Lords Serve-and Protect," *The Movement*, May 1969, 4.
- 13 Eric Mink, "Young Lords & Their Reign," *Daily News*, 17 October 1996, 126.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 "Que Viva El Pueblo": A Biographical History of Cha Cha Jimenez. (Unpublished Manuscript, 1973), 1.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Jules Archer, *Revolution in our Time* (New York: Julian Messner, 1971), 51.
- 18 The Ponce Massacre occurred in 1937, when nineteen Puerto Rican Nationalists were killed by police, and another two hundred were wounded during a peaceful demonstration. The demonstration had been organized on Palm Sunday to protest the U.S. government's imprisonment of Nationalist Party leader Albizu Campos on sedition charges.
- 19 Frank Browning, "From Rumble to Revolution: The Young Lords." *Ramparts* 9 (1970-1971), 19-25.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Fight Area Residents Tell of Police Puerto Rican Relations," 13 June 1966, 2.
- 22 Andres Torres and Jose E. Velazquez eds, *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 212.
- 23 "Interview with Cha Cha Jimenez Chairman-Young Lords Organization." *The Black Panther* 7 June 1969, 17.
- 24 Hilda Vasquez Ignatin, "Young Lords Serve-and-Protect." *The Movement*, May 1969, 4.
- 25 Pablo Guzman, "A Lord of the Barrio," *Village Voice*, 21 March 1995, 1-14.
- 26 Roland Young, "The Young Lords Organization on the Move: Interview with Rafel Viera." *Community News Reporter* 8 February 1970, no page number.
- 27 Pablo Guzman, "A Lord of the Barrio," *Village Voice*, 21 March 1995, 1-14.
- 28 African Americans were more likely to be members of the Young Lords chapter in New York than in Chicago.
- 29 Pablo Guzman, "The Party: From Palante! Young Lords Party in Robert Santiago ed, *Boricuas* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1995), 54.
- 30 Pablo Guzman, "A Lords of the Barrio," *Village Voice*, 21 March 1995b, 1-14.
- 31 Jose Yglesias, "Right on With the Young Lords," *New York Times*, 28 June 1970, 57.

- 32 Michael T. Kaufman, "Black Panthers Join Coalition With Puerto Rican and Appalachian Groups," *New York Times*, 9 November 1969, 1.
- 33 The Black Panther Party was a revolutionary Black internationalist group that wore black leather jackets, black berets, and powder blue shirts as their uniforms. Us was a Black cultural nationalist group founded by Maulana Karenga in Los Angeles in 1965. Us means us against them. The group was known for wearing dashikis. Jose Yglesias, "Right on With the Young Lords," *New York Times*, 28 June 1970,.
- 34 See January issue of YLO for a detailed look at the twelve-point program.
- 35 Whether the Lords carried guns or not is debatable. What is true is that members did not openly carry firearms.
- 36 Jules Archer, *Revolution in our Time* (New York: Julian Messner, 1971), 51.
- 37 Jose Yglesias, "Right on With the Young Lords," *New York Times*, 28 June 1970, 57.
- 38 The Young Patriots was an organization comprised of poor White radicals from the Chicago area.
- 39 Frank Browning, "From Rumble to Revolution: The Young Lords." *Ramparts* 9 (1970-1971), 20.
- 40 "3 Protest Groups Occupy Seminary." *Chicago Sun-Times* 16 May 1969: 46.
- 41 Frank Browning, "From Rumble to Revolution: The Young Lords." *Ramparts* 9 (1970-1971), 20.
- 42 Felix Padilla, *Puerto Rican Chicago* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Federal Program Approved for Lincoln Park Area." 23 June 1969, 28.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 "Council Chairman Calls Housing Biggest Need." *Chicago Tribune* 14 December 1969, 8.
- 47 *Chicago Tribune*, "Assail Lincoln Park Decision." 12 February 1970: 1.
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- 50 Jennifer Lee, "The Young Lords: A New Generation of Puerto Ricans. An Oral History." *Culturefront* Fall (1994): 1.
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- 52 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Puerto Ricans in the Continental United States: An Uncertain Future* (Washington, DC.: Government Printing Office, 1976), 5.
- 53 In *Political Repression in Modern America: 1870 to the Present*, Robert J. Goldstein defines political repression as government action that grossly discriminates against persons or organizations viewed as presenting a fundamental challenge to existing power relationships or key government policies, because of their perceived political beliefs. Robert J. Goldstein, *Political Repression in Modern America: 1870 to the Present* (New York: Schenkman, 1978) XIV.
- 54 "Gang Busters." *The Movement* August 1969, 15

- 55 "Que Viva El Pueblo": A Biographical History of Cha Cha Jiménez. (Unpublished Manuscript, 1973), 19.
- 56 Ibid, 21.
- 57 Ibid, 21.
- 58 The Red Squad was an undercover police unit within the Chicago Police Department. The CPD used Red Squad officers to infiltrate groups, spy on their activities and at times provoke the group's members into foolish actions.
- 59 Felix M. Padilla, *Puerto Rican Chicago* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 172.
- 60 Janet Jones, "You Can't Stop Us." *The Movement* (June 1969): 4.
- 61 Ward Churchill and Jim Vanderwall, *The Cointelpro Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).
- 62 David Gonzalez, "Young Lords: Vital in 60's, A Model Now." *New York Times* 16 October 1996, Section B: 1.
- 63 Anthony Oberschall, "The Decline of the 1960 Social Movements." In Louis Kriesberg ed., *Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* (Greenwich, CT: Jai Press, 1978), 277-88.
- 64 Giuseppe Fiori, *Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary* (London: New Left Books, 1970) and John M. Cammet, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 28, 36.
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- 66 Pablo Guzman, "The Party: From Palante! Young Lords Party" in Roberto Santiago ed., *Boricuas* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995a) ,59-70.
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- 68 "We're Fighting Freedom Together...There is no other way." *The Movement* (1969), 13.
- 69 Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements* (New York: Pantheon, 1977) ,101-2.
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