

**Peter Bohmer**  
**Interviewed by Anthony Zaragoza**  
**The Evergreen State College oral history project**  
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**FINAL**

**Zaragoza:** If you would just start by telling us your name and where you're from.

**Bohmer:** Okay. Peter Bohmer. I was born in 1944, during World War II, in Queens, New York, a part of Queens called Rego Park. My parents and my grandparents had left the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My grandparents—three from what is today the Czech Republic and one from Slovakia—spoke mainly German or Hungarian growing up. The grandparents moved to Vienna as young adults, and my parents were both born in Vienna.

My mom, which was unusual, had a high school degree, and worked as a gym teacher and as an exercise-dance teacher. Very beautiful. My father was younger, and his father, they were pretty well off. They made shoes. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade. The Nazis either invaded Austria or were welcomed into Austria in 1938. My parents said more welcomed than invaded, because there was really strong pro-Nazi support in Austria.

My father, because his dad had been active in the Jewish community, was arrested when the German Nazis entered Austria. It was really more a prison run by the Nazis in Vienna rather than a concentration camp, but it was hard. He was beaten a lot. My mom worked hard to get him released. He got out after, I believe, four months, it may have been a bit longer. They got married—a few days afterward, and then they went across the border to France. They wanted to go to Australia because they were afraid of the violence in the United States from the movies. They couldn't get a visa to Australia. It was very hard for Jewish people to get visas to other countries. But they found some sponsors, I don't know how, well-off Jews in New York who supported their immigration and helped them get permission to live in the United States.

They got a visa. They came on a very big ship. One of the really big trans-Atlantic liners. They came to New York in 1939. They lived in a tenement in the Upper West Side through 1943. It's sad. My dad was a very talented person. He was working at the Brooklyn Navy Shipyard and my mom had gotten pregnant with me. She was afraid they didn't speak English well. My dad spoke to someone at the shipyard who said if my dad would pay him a small amount of money, he would not be drafted into

the army and have to go fight, even though he was working on building ships for the military. My dad had worked both as a draftsman and as a machinist.

The guy who my dad paid probably was crooked and being watched by the FBI. My father got arrested with the criminal charge of avoiding the draft. The FBI pressured my dad a lot, and my mom, too and said to them, "If you say you're guilty, nothing much will happen." My dad got a three-year sentence. So when I was born, he was in a federal prison in Atlanta. It was a big family secret. I never knew until I was 18 that my father, Willy, did almost a year in prison and was then released. I was 10 months old when he got out of prison.

We were living in Rego Park, Queens, New York City. They had moved there into a rent-controlled apartment in 1943 just before my dad went to prison. I have a brother, Roger, two years younger. We grew up in this apartment building. My mom lived there until she died in 2007, she was 97 years old. My grandmother, my mom's mom, also lived with us. She went from Austria to Sweden and then to Havana, Cuba to escape the Nazis and worked as a cook there during World War II, from 1940 to 1946. Just before my brother Roger was born, she came to the U.S. So the five of us lived in a one-bedroom apartment. But then, when I got to seven or eight, they got a two-bedroom apartment in the same building. Rent control made housing affordable.

I grew up in Rego Park, a neighborhood that was very white ethnic. For example, my public high school had 5,000 students and only 100 black students, and maybe 100 Puerto Ricans in the whole school. It was large majority Jewish. There were some Irish Americans and Italian Americans but they mainly went to Parochial School. I hardly knew any WASP people until I got to college. I was a very good student. I played sports a lot but I was very much into math.

I was really good in math, and got a partial scholarship and a loan to go to MIT. I graduated a year early from high school and went in 1961 to MIT. Roger came there a year later. He had skipped two years. He wasn't even 16 when he finished high school. I was social. I felt a little bit inadequate in high school, especially with the good students, mostly because they came from much more intellectual backgrounds. I made a switch in the economic class of students I hung out with from junior high school to high school. Most of my friends before high school were mainly working-class, and the majority did not go to college and if they did, it was a public college, usually Queens College. In high school, even with my new friends, though, I usually didn't know the right authors and words. I increasingly socialized with the intellectual kids, the ones who wanted to go to elite colleges. I didn't shun my friends who I lived around, but I spent less time with them.

**Zaragoza:** Then in college, what do you study? What are your major interests at that point?

**Bohmer:** In some ways, I really wasn't fully prepared for college and MIT and living on my own. I came from a really strict home. Like a lot of immigrants, the family was everything. It was a very loving home but strict, e.g., we could hardly go out at night and spent most weekends with our parents. So in college, I didn't have much self-discipline. I went to MIT as a math major and had really bad study habits. And math, up through calculus, or even a little more advanced than that, was really easy. I remember in a second-year calculus class although I was a freshman, when the teacher got sick he asked me to teach the class for a month although I was one of the only first-year students.

But then—I believe it was bad study habits—when it got to really theoretical stuff, all of a sudden it was really hard, and I began to get Cs. I think if I'd had better study habits, I would have been better, but I just think when it got to very theoretical math like modern algebra and topology, it was no longer easy. I was very good at applied math, but the really theoretical stuff was very difficult for me.

**Zaragoza:** That story is exactly my math story. I started majoring in math, and then when there were math puzzles that I could just get quick, easy. But then, like you say, when it becomes theoretical, and you have to sit with a math textbook, I didn't want to do that.

**Bohmer:** I didn't want to, and it was really hard for me. I think I loved math, partly because I was good at it and it was easy. Was that true for you, too?

**Zaragoza:** Yeah, I like puzzles.

**Bohmer:** Yeah, math problems. I forgot, but I was on the math team in high school. In my senior year, it was the first time a regular public high school—not one of the special schools— won the city championship and I was a key part of that winning team. So difficult math problems, in geometry and especially algebra, really engaged me.

At the end of my sophomore year at MIT, I switched my major to economics from math although with a major continuing concentration in mathematics. I didn't really understand much about the economy, but economics was easy for me because it was quite mathematical and had a similar logic to mathematics. I am talking about neoclassical mainstream economics. At that time—this was the mid-1960s— you could just get a degree in economics or humanities at MIT, so I ended up getting a degree in economics and math, but I filled up the math much more with applied math classes as opposed to the super-theoretical ones.

I wasn't a particularly good student my first two years at MIT, I didn't go to a lot of classes and stayed up very late. I was a very good poker player, and I won a few thousand dollars playing poker but in some ways it was like a job. I won because I had a lot of energy, and so I would usually be pretty even until about midnight or 1:00 am. The games would go all night, and other people would be tired or they would have a drink or so. Most of my winning came very late at night. I was not good enough to be a professional player, but I was very good for college. I was also on the bridge team and tennis team at MIT. I played all sorts of intramural sports, so that took a lot of time. I wasn't very happy at MIT and almost transferred. But at the beginning of my junior year, I got happier. My study habits improved, I began to attend class regularly. In terms of grades, I did well in college my last two years, not my first two.

By 1962, I began to get really interested in the Civil Rights Movement. Intellectually, MIT was a somewhat conservative and not very politically engaged place at that time, and partly getting active is caused by meeting people who are activists when you are ready and I did not know many people who were. I remember a friend of mine—he was one of the few African Americans on campus and a dorm tutor, we went to a meeting he had invited me to, my freshman year. It was about Communism. I wasn't anti-Communist but neither was I sympathetic or knowledgeable. The speaker was Fred Schwartz, a virulent anti-communist. Schwartz's talk was about how to figure out who were Communists. We both snuck out.

**Zaragoza:** Like J Edgar Hoover-type stuff?

**Bohmer:** Fred Schwartz. Yeah, he was totally right wing. I remember another example from my first year at MIT. The teaching assistant in my introductory to macroeconomics class was Stephen Hymer, who became a leading Marxist economist but who died at an early age, in his 30's. You may know his name. He wrote very insightfully, years after I had him as a teacher about U.S. imperialism and unequal development. Paul Samuelson, probably the most prominent economist at the time was the professor for the class, I believe it was introduction to Microeconomics. In the discussion class, led by Hymer, we were talking about income inequality. I said, "I think we should make income more equal, by taxing the rich more and not have poor people pay taxes." He said, "What are you, a Communist?" Of course, he was being sympathetic, but I was so offended by that, I didn't go to class for the rest of the quarter because I thought he was attacking me.

So I was definitely a liberal, and my parents, they had really, really good values and were strongly anti-fascist but they also felt totally powerless. The idea that you could actually change society

through organizing and social movements, was totally outside of their belief system. For me, growing up in the 1960's, this belief that people organizing and mobilizing, that social movements matter and can change society became fundamental to my being. I got the values from my parents, but the activism from the 1960's and it has stayed with me.

By 1963 or 1964 I was reading magazines like *The Nation* and then Ramparts. I developed a strong position against U.S. involvement in Vietnam. I supported total U.S withdrawal from Vietnam and was also becoming politicized and increasingly critical of mainstream politics and economic analysis although I wasn't yet a radical. I didn't go to the South as a Civil Rights worker although I admired those who did. I collected supplies, and did some volunteer work in the black community in Cambridge, like refereeing basketball, tutoring, coaching, from 1963 to 1965.

April, 1965 was the first big Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) demonstration against the Vietnam War. They called for immediate withdrawal which was criticized by the more mainstream anti-war groups. SDS expected a few thousand people and it ended up being about 20,000. I heard about it and wanted to go, but couldn't find anyone to go with, so I didn't go in the end but I followed it closely.

So in my undergraduate years at MIT, 1961 to 1965, I studied economics and math, and had many friends. I played a lot of sports. I wasn't really an activist, but a lot of the ideas—particularly what was going on in the South and Vietnam—were really capturing my attention. I began to realize I was much more interested in that than the economics I was studying.

**Zaragoza:** What's the next step for you? What happened after college?

**Bohmer:** I finished MIT, and even though it was this elite school, I didn't really know much about college when I went. I wanted to make it into the middle class, or what I now call the professional managerial class and I thought MIT would be my ticket and would also be the best for advancing in math and having the best math education possible.

So in 1965, as I was approaching graduation for a Bachelor of Science (BS) degree, I was worried about being drafted. At the time, from a reformist point of view, I wanted to get a job working for a labor union. I was pro-labor although not anti-capitalist. I did not actually know how to find a job working for a labor union. I was getting grades of A in most of my economics classes my junior and senior year, so some of the faculty there said, "What are you going to do afterward?" I said, "I don't really know." They said, "We can help you get into grad school". A major reason of who advances is whom you know. I got a lot of offers for fellowships, for tuition and expenses being covered in many Ph.D. programs in economics although I hadn't thought about going to grad school before November or

December of my senior year in college. I picked Northwestern University because it was supposed to be a very good economics department, and they offered me a fellowship that paid my living expenses, and free tuition for my graduate studies without having to be a Teaching Assistant so I went there.

**Zaragoza:** Northwestern in Chicago?

**Bohmer:** Yes in Evanston which borders Chicago. I had never been to a demonstration before I went there. It's funny, I went to some SDS meetings, but again, I was afraid of not getting into the middle class and I wouldn't sign attendance sheets at the meetings although I challenged my mom who said, "Never sign anything," because they had suffered quite a bit. But I would say to her "We live in a democracy, so we should be able to sign an attendance sheet of a group critical of government policies without repercussions." I pointed out the contradiction.

I went to a few demonstrations in support of integration in Evanston in 1965-1966. Evanston was mainly white and there was a segregated Black community. You know Evanston, Illinois?

**Zaragoza:** A little bit.

**Bohmer:** It was a very segregated city. The school was almost totally white. Through playing a lot of poker, I knew a lot of the basketball players who also played so I possibly knew a third to a half of the black students at the school. It was a tiny proportion in this elite, very fraternity and WASP dominated wealthy, private university.

I began to meet people who were against the war, students who came up from the University of Chicago. I wouldn't say I was an activist or leftist yet, but I began to see major changes in myself, and I began to question a lot of what I had studied. At Northwestern, I took a class on comparative economic systems with an outstanding professor, Professor Karl De Schweinitz. I don't know if he was a socialist, but he taught us about socialism and socialist writers and after that class I began to consider myself pro-socialist.

By the summer of 1966, I was changing my priorities and world view quite rapidly. I was working a terrible job outside of D.C. It was a think tank connected to the military. I was hired to do research about the Japanese economy. Specifically, if a war broke out or threatened between China and the U.S., would Japan side with China because the costs of being a U.S. ally were too high? It was reactionary research. I had no energy for it and never completed the research. I've never had energy for things or projects I don't care about.

I went to some demonstrations against the Vietnam War in D.C., where I lived that summer. While I was there, I learned that Robert Solow, an MIT professor who I had done really well in his classes, even though he ended up really disliking me, had told my brother, Roger, the following: “Peter’s a really good economist. He’s excellent at math, and we’ll take him back at MIT and give him a full scholarship for completing his Ph.D. We’ll match Northwestern.” So that’s why I went back to MIT.

Upon returning to MIT in the Ph.D. program in fall, 1966, I became more and more critical of what I was studying, neoclassical economics that supported for example, U.S. corporate investment in the Third World, and critical of most of the students who seemed more concerned about advancing their careers than the economic and social implications of what they were studying.

The summer of 1967 was a turning point in my life. I was studying for my qualifying exam for my PhD, which I planned to take in fall, 1967—and really disliking neoclassical economics more and more, a lot, doing my study half-assedly. I was getting increasingly involved in Vietnam Summer, my first organizing experience. We would go door to door and try to talk about the war if people were willing to talk to us. I did two neighborhoods. One was working-class and one a little bit less so in Boston. Most people wouldn’t talk, and they’d slam the door on us. A lot of them thought I was against the soldiers who were in Vietnam, if you were against the war. But some people invited us in, and even though I was somewhat shy—I had a slideshow—and they were interested in learning more. They would often invite some neighbors, and then have the meeting, show the slideshow. I slowly became more confident and found this organizing and my fellow organizers in Vietnam Summer much more interesting and thoughtful and relevant than most of my fellow economics graduate students.

I began realizing I had so much more energy for activism than I had for school. You know, we would figure out, should we do lobbying, should we organize protests? All of a sudden, I was becoming a different and better human being. So that, and then October 1967 was a really big event for my transformation into a committed activist. This was the very famous march on the Pentagon. I went with many friends from Boston. It was one of the really major protests against the U.S. War against Vietnam, maybe half a million people. We had a permit until 5:00 P.M., and I remember a speaker who really challenged and affected me, Dick Gregory. He was a Civil Rights activist and also a comedian. He said, “Are you all going to be 9:00 to 5:00 activists, are you going to just stop protesting because we don’t have a permit or are you going to take a strong stand against the Vietnam War?”

I was so inspired by his talk. Nobody I was with was staying. However about 10,000 people from around the country stayed at the Pentagon past 5 P.M. It was a very famous action because of

Norman Mailer's book on it, some of the theatrics, and when some demonstrators, mainly women—were giving flowers to the military Police (MPs) on their bayonets. But what affected me most was demonstrators letting themselves get hit, because what happened was once the last camera from the BBC about 9:00-9:30 P.M. left, the military police (MPs) started hitting people with their rifles and bayonet. I urged my fellow protesters to avoid being hit and in defense, to throw rocks at the attacking MPs. The violence, especially after the media left, really angered me. I stayed all night, and I loved and felt part of this community of resisters. Many, including me, burned their draft cards.

Then I walked back—I was exhausted at about 7 am the next morning to D.C. where I was staying, just across the bridge from the Pentagon, which was in Virginia. A few days later, my brother's girlfriend's father, who was a writer for the *New York Times* told his daughter, Anne, who told us the following. James Reston, who was a famous and respected columnist, he reminded me of Thomas Friedman, a mouthpiece and confidant of the ruling class, especially the political elites, had a column on the front page of the *Times*, not the opinion page. Reston wrote how the demonstrators turned violent, militant, aggressive and so on. I saw that didn't happen, and Anne told my brother, Roger, that Reston had actually been in Denver, Colorado that weekend. However, if you read his article on the front page, Reston didn't actually say he was at this protest at the Pentagon, but anybody who read it would have thought he was there. This further radicalized me as I had thought the *New York Times* was objective.

The U.S. war against Vietnam really changed my world view and analysis of the United States and my commitments and priorities in life. At first I thought the Vietnam war was a horrible mistake, that policy makers would soon end it. I remember writing many letters to government leaders, and even for a short time in 1967, I was the head of the Bobby Kennedy for President committee in Massachusetts, where I was living. I liked Bobby Kennedy at the time. I also had liked John Kennedy, earlier. I was naïve in many ways. But then I began to understand that the causes of the Vietnam war were more systemic, and I began to openly challenge the faculty at MIT for their liberal cold-war politics. Even more than the economics department, many of the political science faculty at MIT had been or were tied to the CIA or the U.S. military, receiving grants or as advisers. I began to really identify more with social movements including the more radical and more militant ones.

So that's some of my beginning involvement.

**Zaragoza:** After MIT, what's your next step?

**Bohmer:** I was at MIT in the late 1960's. I was mainly active at MIT but also with working class youth in Cambridge. For example, I was in a collective that tried to organize at two public housing projects. The



Black Panther Party was organizing like the black youth, and we were organizing the white youth. That was very meaningful to me.

I was also in a coalition with many groups, including the Black Panther Party, the November Action Coalition. Many people I knew joined the Weathermen. I did like their strong anti-imperialist and anti-racist politics. However, I knew white working-class people were also oppressed, and the Weathermen, who were often from upper-class backgrounds, denied the oppression of white workers and focused on white privilege. I remember a leader of the Weathermen, in fall, 1969 (they later changed their name to Weather or Weather Underground) saying, “The role of the white leftist is to run the concentration camps where most whites would be put”. I was not very sympathetic to that position to put it mildly, and found it reprehensible.

I was really active in the New Left and stopped working on my dissertation which I never got going. My teaching assistantship at MIT ran out in spring, 1969 and I wasn’t enrolled in 1969-1070. So the military wanted to draft me. Organizing militant resistance at the draft physical in Boston became very common as opposition to the U.S. war against Vietnam became massive throughout society. Public opinion against the war outside and inside the military grew substantially after the February, 1968 Tet Offensive. The realization that the U.S. government was lying when it said victory was just around the corner was a major reason. With three other people, we organized a riot at our physical for the army which was the final step before being inducted. So I was rejected and not taken into the army for being hostile and having violent tendencies. That is ironic, given it was in the middle of the violent and murderous Vietnam War where the U.S. was responsible for at least two million deaths.

I was very hostile to and critical of MIT because of their active involvement in carrying out the Vietnam War, in U.S. intervention abroad, e.g., in Latin America, and their large contracts with the Defense Department and CIA. Because of very active organizing against this complicity, an injunction was gotten by MIT against 10 of us, and I was banned from campus by spring 1970.

**Zaragoza:** Lifetime? Have you been back?

**Bohmer:** I was invited back by students to speak at MIT in 1980 to speak about activism and actions there in the late 1960’s and 1970. I had been banned in 1970 and the MIT police chief came up to me in 1980, just before I spoke and he said, “You cannot be here, legally” but he wasn’t going to do anything. He asked me for my autograph and said, “It was the most interesting time of my life”, because not much happens at MIT that involves the campus police.

I forgot to say I took class from Noam Chomsky in 1968, Intellectuals and Social Change, and we have been close since. Noam told me later, "MIT changed its admission policies after this period to take more students in engineering, because almost all the activists were either humanities or science majors." There was a difference between the science students and the engineering students. MIT is mainly engineering students again.

To protest the continued war research and the expulsion of the student body president, Michael Albert, and active member of Rosa Luxemburg SDS, which I was very active in, we took over the MIT President's offices. We all got probation for the occupation, except for one student. He did a year in jail for building the battering ram that we used to open the door to the office. We exposed the MIT-CIA connections by hacking into the computer in the President's office. MIT wasn't very happy about this, nor was the CIA, by having these contracts being exposed.

The second day of the occupation, my friend George Katsiaficas and I—this was early 1970—we tried to enter three large classes to ask the students to join the ongoing occupation. One teacher let us in, and he said, "You can do a brief explanation and make a short announcement, which we did. The two other teachers freaked out because we were going into their class. We didn't hit anybody, but there was a little bit of pushing and shoving.

George Katsiaficas and I got arrested for disturbing the school for trying to go into the two classrooms. We got a 30-day sentence in district court, and we appealed it. We got a new trial but the superior court judge gave us a 60-day sentence. It got added publicity because George's mother who was a public school teacher and Greek immigrant, got up in court and said, "My son is not a criminal." So she got 10 days for contempt in a much tougher place than we were, and went on a hunger strike there. They released her after six days.

The two professors who testified against us lied about us in their testimony in court. They claimed that we attacked them and came with a big mob, we were just by ourselves. People burned down their offices the night we went to prison, but we had zero to do with it, but it did give us credibility in prison. We got out a few days before the 60 days were up.

I had become a committed activist and radical and began to see myself as a revolutionary. It was a very different period from now, one of a major growth of the college population and a high demand for full-time faculty. You did not need to have completed your PhD to get a college teaching job. So I applied to many public universities, and I got offered a job at San Diego State as an assistant professor of economics. San Diego was attractive to me because of its proximity to the border which I

was very interested in and the large military population which I thought was important to reach out to in order to support and work with the growing anti-war activism and consciousness of GI's. I wanted to learn more about Mexico, the border and immigration to the U.S. and San Diego seemed like a good place for this.

**Zaragoza:** This was your first West Coast exposure.

**Bohmer:** I had never been to the West Coast. I had lived in Chicago but that was the farthest west I had been. Also, I had friends saying—because I was so involved with opposing the Vietnam War—most of the antiwar movement, we definitely didn't see GIs as heroes, but we didn't see them as baby killers, except for a few. So I thought San Diego with its many military bases would be a strategic place to move to in terms of deepening the anti-Vietnam war movement, especially but not limited to GI's. I got offered teaching positions at Sacramento State and Long Beach State--the West Coast was very romantic to me. I started teaching at San Diego State in September 1970.

**Zaragoza:** How long were you in San Diego? Tell us about that period.

**Bohmer:** That was a very intense period. I taught for two years at San Diego State. I was a very popular teacher because I was so active and students could see the connection between theory and practice. I also learned a lot from the students because my classes—they were usually called EOP classes—were often half or more Black/Latino students. It was a period, because of the demands of the Black movement and the Mexican/Chicano movement, on and off campus, of a substantial growth of both Black and Mexican students at San Diego State University, beginning in fall, 1968. In 1968, there were about 50 students of Mexican background in a school of over 30,000. By the time I got there in 1970, it had grown to about 1,800. Five to six percent was still far below the proportion of the population in San Diego or California of Mexican heritage but it was a significant increase.

**Zaragoza:** EOP stands for Equal Opportunity Program.

**Bohmer:** Educational Opportunity Program. I remember one student who was Chicano from the county east of San Diego, Imperial County. He invited me out there to learn about the Imperial Valley and meet his family, it was 1971. It seemed like feudalism to me, the neighborhood where farmworker families lived compared to the growers. These were permanent residents not migrants following the crops. There were dirt roads, the houses were basically shacks, and you could see the houses of the growers, these 20-plus-room houses. Even though I had seen a lot of poverty, inequality in New York, Boston and Chicago, it was very visual to me the class and "race" inequality. I learned a lot that weekend which has always stayed with me.

I learned more about Mexico and Mexican people, and got really interested in the movements there. Unfortunately, it was a repressive period in Mexico which has been more the rule rather than the exception. It was also a repressive period in the U.S. Reagan was Governor of California and Nixon was President. I became targeted in a major way. My second year teaching at SD State—I just had had my contract renewed—there were charges against me coming from Governor Reagan’s office. They were a variety of charges. One charge was that students who wanted to get into my classes when they were full—my classes were very popular—that I gave preferences to enroll in them to white women and black, Latino and Native American students, my classes were still about 40 percent white male.

Out of hundreds of students, two brought charges against me with the encouragement of Reagan’s office -- one was an ROTC student and the main witness was a Vietnam vet who brought a lot of charges against me. They included that I had discriminated against Vietnam vets, and that is why it became a national case. The guy who brought it—I had students grade themselves, and he got an A in fall but a B in spring semester which he claimed was discriminatory. One day in a comparative economic systems class we were talking about China—I wasn’t a Maoist but pretty sympathetic to China in that period. The focus on improving the lives of peasants and maintain a rural economy and population and that peasants were deserving of dignity and respect and access to education and healthcare resonated with me. We were finishing our section on the political economy of China when Dennis Kenneally spoke up and said, “Why do we talk about Asians so much in this class? We all know they don’t value human life like Americans do.”

I did get very angry. There were a lot of Iranian students in the class. They told them how racist his comment was and that maybe it wouldn’t be comfortable for him in the class. Dennis Kenneally, the Vietnam Vet, claimed I had threatened him and he became a cause celebre. There was also a brave Vietnamese student, Phu, in this class. He spoke up a lot, especially against the Vietnam war and the U.S. invasion. Phu was very antiwar. It’s a myth that all the Vietnamese in the U.S. supported the war, there was an active group of anti-Vietnam war Vietnamese, the Union of Concerned Vietnamese Students. Dennis Kenneally, the right-wing student said to Phu, “You know what we did to gooks like you in Vietnam, we slit their throats.” Kenneally bragged how he once killed 50 people with a machine gun from his helicopter. But he became this hero nationally to the right-wing because he was the one who brought charges against me. The woman who lived next door to him was a very progressive person and faculty at San Diego State, Jackie Tunberg. She said how there was pressure from Governor Reagan’s office calling to bring charges against me that Kenneally told her about.

There were three hearings, one dealt with my behavior inside of class and a second dealt with my behavior outside of class and the third dealt with all of them. Six thousand students signed a petition supporting me. There were many big rallies and demonstrations. A few broke some laws, a few windows got broken, but they basically were peaceful, large rallies, two of 1000 people plus, mainly students. I didn't control the rallies, but I got blamed for any rowdiness. I was cleared of all the charges against me from all three hearings including from a national panel of AAUP faculty and investigators, and the faculty union and economics faculty supported me very, very strongly. A very wonderful person and economics faculty was Clint Jencks. He plays himself in the movie *Salt of the Earth*, an organizer of the Mine, Mill and Smelter workers, one of the unions expelled from the CIO in the late 1940's. Clint was a wise and warm and caring human being, a fighter for justice who made the transition in the 1960's from the Old Left to the New Left. He represented to me very capably in these hearings. We worked together.

(note: By New Left I meant the politics I identified with strongly. We differentiated ourselves from the Old Left. It meant a politics that believed in revolutionary anti-capitalist transformation. We also believed in the centrality of revolutions in the third world and the central role of struggles against racism and sexism and the importance of Black Liberation Movements, that class exploitation was central to U.S. society but so were racial and gender oppression. We also held strongly that we need to change ourselves, our behavior and consciousness, as we revolutionized society and the importance of direct and militant action.)

He and I went a few times to various communities, mainly Chicano working-class communities, and showed the film, *Salt of the Earth*, one of my favorite films of all time. I still show it in class at Evergreen. It is about a strike at a mine in New Mexico where workers win a strike by challenging sexism among the miners. This movie is from the early 1950's and based on an actual strike. It shows the interrelation of race and gender oppression with class exploitation and the need to connect and challenge all forms of oppression in order to transform this society, I organized the events but had Clint Jencks talk about the film and its relevance when we showed it in the early 1970's. I learned a lot from Clint. He was a mentor of mine in San Diego. John Hardesty was another economics faculty who I worked with a lot, a good friend and comrade.

Even though I was found innocent at all three hearings, the head of the California State University system, Chancellor Glen Dumke fired me at the end of the school year, late May 1972. The faculty union appealed my firing in the California courts, The American Economic Association examined my case and

as far as I know, it was the only firing of an economics professor where they found political discrimination, but I didn't get my job back. It went to the State Supreme Court, but because of my behavior at one of the demonstrations, they ruled that they wouldn't overrule Dumke's decision. I may have made some tactical errors.

I began to get a lot of death threats in San Diego, they began in spring 1971 from a group called the Secret Army Organization, SAO. They used to be called the Minutemen—and they were statewide, mainly anti-Communist and violent although white supremacist also.

Besides being frequently followed, there were escalating attacks and threats. I can't remember how many times from early 1971 to winter, 1972, two or more of my tires were slashed on my car, also tear gas put inside my car and other cars of members of the collective house we lived in. In December 1971, because of all these threats, I sometimes carried a gun although I don't like guns but for self-defense. I had a permit also, because even though the police were not sympathetic to me but with all these threats, they did give me a permit. I went into a gun shop that month and I saw this wanted poster of me, wanted dead or alive--there were crosshairs and it gave my description and address—and 300 were made.

I knew most of the men's basketball players, because many were in my class and I was into basketball and other sports. They got me two tickets to the January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1972, Long Beach State-San Diego State game. They got me front-row seats. I went with my friend and economics colleague, John Hardesty. Most of the players were Black. They talked to me and with each other about the racism they witnessed and experienced and how they were upset and angered by it, but thought not much could be done about it or the risks were too high to challenge racism. They enthusiastically supported my anti-racist and other activism. I remember once the captain of the team calling me from Hawaii to tell me about the racism the team faced there. I came back after the game with John Hardesty. We saw all these police outside the house. So I thought there was an arrest going on because I did have a few bogus arrests at this time. We drove to a phonebooth and called the house I lived in on Muir Avenue in the Ocean Beach community of San Diego.

What had actually happened while I was at the basketball game was there was a shooting into the house, two shots. Earlier that day, there were threatening stickers on my office door at school, and some friends who lived a block away and were doing GI organizing received a call, "Say good-bye to your friends down the street."

A woman I was living with, Paula Tharp, we weren't lovers, even though it was portrayed that way by the mainstream medias, was standing by the window. One bullet hit her in the elbow and another bullet got lodged in the window frame. We said right away that the shooting was done by the Secret Army Organization (SAO) because they had identified themselves by that name in many of their death threats but the police didn't do anything. We then formed a group the "Committee to Investigate Right-Wing Terrorism" that included many people committed to civil liberties that actively publicized this case and right-wing threats and their fascist ideology.

A few months later the Secret Army Organization (SAO) put out a second wanted poster calling for my death and it wrote how prominent liberals rather than burying me and supporting or carrying out my murder, were instead coddling me. That came out I believe in April, 1972. We had moved out of the house on Muir Ave. after the shooting and the members of our collective divided up into three apartments. The local San Diego Nazi Party group shot into the house we had moved out of, after publicly criticizing the SAO for having failed in their attempted assassination of me. In June, the SAO (Secret Army Organization) bombed a pornography movie theater in downtown Olympia, claiming pornography was a communist strategy to weaken the United States.

There were an undercover cop and a DA involved in prosecuting leftists in the theater at the time of the bombing. I think they were just there, but they said they were there investigating the theater. They received injuries. Prior to the bombing, the San Diego police claimed they knew nothing about the January shooting into the house I lived in. After the bombing and also because of the political pressure exerted by the prominent people named in the second wanted poster, the San Diego Police demanded that the FBI turn over to them, police, the FBI informant inside the SAO. The main person in the SA, Howard Barry Godfrey, was on the payroll of the FBI as an informant. The wanted poster, the SAO put out on me, all of the information came from the FBI files on me. All of the SAO expenses, all of the guns, all came from the FBI.

The San Diego police, arrested George Hoover, whom they claimed was the shooter, and also another SAO member, William Yakopec, who the police charged with bombing the movie theater among other charges. They both were convicted and got lengthy prison term. The FBI agent who hid the gun after the shooting and knew about it, was fired, but the FBI effectively prevented testimony about their role in this terrorism from being part of the trial.

It was a very intense period for me. There were constant death threats, our cars being fire-bombed, tear gas in our cars, being followed. Also a lot of arrests by the police, usually on minor

charges after demonstrations I participated in. Even if the charges were later dropped it took time and energy.

A major reason there was repression against other activists and me and significant infiltration into groups that I was involved in, was connected to President Nixon having planned to have the Republican Convention in San Diego in the summer of 1972. We formed a really broad coalition, the San Diego Convention Coalition (SDCC). We were organizing and planning teach-ins, a left fair and exhibition of groups nationally and globally with audio hookup, large demonstrations and direct action before and during the Convention. The attempt was to connect issues and movements opposed to the Nixon administration.

I was actively involved in the SDCC, but wasn't in the leadership of it because I was so active in defending myself and anti-war organizing and teaching, plus community organizing. Some of the Watergate people met with the SAO during this period, 1971-1972. Not Nixon directly- but the Republican Party, the Committee to Reelect the President (CREEP), met with the SAO and other right-wing people to plan to disrupt our protests and possibly kidnap organizers including me during the Republican Convention. When the SAO trials took place in fall, 1972, they said they had met with some of the Nixon people, people who broke into Watergate. There was a direct connection between Watergate and the Secret Army Organization and the FBI.

**Zaragoza:** Has that been documented anywhere?

**Bohmer:** It's been documented, see for example, *The New York Times*, June 27, 1975, "A.C.L.U. Says FBI Funded "Army" to Terrorize Young War Dissidents". As a response to Watergate and to investigate related government wrongdoing, the U.S. Senate established the Church Commission headed by Senator Frank Church of Idaho. There were investigations both of the CIA and of domestic repression and government spying. It focused too much on the attacks on liberals; repression was much greater against left individuals and organizations, particularly the Black, Mexican and Native American left, but also white leftists who were active, like me. We also were targeted, but much less than what happened to many Black radical organizations such as the Black Panther party. But it was serious and illegal and unconstitutional and the Church Commission had lengthy hearings.

The Los Angeles American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) —a very progressive and active chapter— volunteered to take this case on, on my behalf and three others in San Diego, including Paula Tharp, who had been shot by the SAO in January 1972. Peter Young, a lawyer affiliated with the ACLU, prepared an excellent brief for the Church Committee and a major lawsuit that sued not only the San Diego police



and FBI but up to and including Nixon. The problem was they didn't put up enough resources into the case, and they filed this huge lawsuit. Still, a lot is documented in the lawsuit document. I have a copy of it that maybe I could make for the Archives.

The lawsuit ended up suing everybody who was indirectly or directly involved, Nixon, the heads of the FBI, Kissinger, etc. It was too broad, because getting subpoenas for such a huge case was a major undertaking. I do think the available evidence and the connected strong legal case against the government and police agencies was unusual in terms of the many form of repression, including violence against white radicals, although as I already mentioned, such repression including government murder or sanctioned murder was more against radicals who were not white. The main lawyer in this lawsuit, who recently died, Peter Young, had been one of the two lawyers in the Pentagon Papers case he represented the less famous defendant, Anthony Russo. The lawsuit required a lot of money, I believe the ACLU budgeted \$10,000, which wasn't enough. I have always had problems raising money for situations directly connected to me so I didn't try to raise money. Eventually, the case got thrown out, not because of its lack of validity, but because our lawyer, Peter Young, had missed some deadlines for the case. Probably the best single documentation available is the ACLU report.

**Zaragoza:** What then do you go on to do after your time in San Diego?

**Bohmer:** San Diego was a very intense period that is still fresh in my memory and has certainly significantly influenced my life, who I am, my theory and practice, even though I left there in late 1975. For example I ended up knowing 20 people who were either police informants or police agents of some type in the political groups I worked with in San Diego. I am very careful before I call someone an agent or informant because I have received calls about people I had political differences with—this happened to me a few time, saying, "This and this person is an agent."

I remember there was one guy I worked with in a group, the Center for Radical Economics; it later changed its name to Center for Radical Education (CRE). We were all leftist but very diverse politically. The person I am talking about, supported Stalin and to what I considered a rigid dogmatic political ideology. This was common among leftists in the 1970's, in what was called, The New Communist Movement. I was completely against Stalin, and the San Diego police, obviously knew about our differences as there was a police informant in the group, a purely educational group. Somebody called me twice saying, "We work for the police. We can't tell you who we are, but Jim, who is a member of CRE is a San Diego police informant." A friend of mine and I followed Jim for 30 hours including where we were told, he met with his police handler. I am sure, looking back, he wasn't an

informant. We've made up now. And I never denounced him because I am very careful to be certain before exposing someone, because what we call a snitch jacket can destroy a person's reputation and cause them to be shunned and maybe even worse.

Law enforcement and the state work to divide people and cause suspicion and mistrust. So I never would never call someone a snitch even when I was suspicious unless the evidence was overwhelming. I'm saying with 20 people, I'm 99 percent sure that they were police agents or informants.

That is part of my experience, which in some ways has made me somewhat suspicious or at least more suspicious than I would be otherwise that people are not who say they are. There were two women in San Diego, one whom I knew and worked with in CRE, and one who worked for a detective agency—a really beautiful woman. They were asked by the FBI and San Diego police to seduce me and then get me to admit to crimes connected to my activism that the government could indict me for. I didn't have sex with either of them. It was a very strange period for me.

I was sentenced to California State prison in Chino in January, 1973. I got convicted of aiding and abetting the stopping of a train with war supplies that was going from Los Angeles to San Diego to Vietnam. My organizing and activism and speaking and taking action against the Vietnam War is what I am most proud of in my life and probably the most important. Although I was involved in helping to plan and participating in many, many direct actions against the U.S. War against the Vietnamese people, I wasn't involved in planning this particular demonstration in Del Mar, California, just north of San Diego. I was very visible at the action. Protesters did stop the train by burning some railroad ties on the tracks, but the train had stopped a quarter of a mile away, so there was no threat of injury. The train got delayed for a few hours because of the burning of wooden railroad ties. The San Diego Sheriffs—it was Delmar, California, so it was the sheriffs not the police, went wild beating people after the fire on the tracks started. Many people got beaten, and I hid in the woods near the railroad tracks and later made it back to San Diego. Even the mayor of Del Mar, who was observing, got beaten. There was a call by officials from Del Mar to convene a grand jury to investigate the action and the police behavior. However only antiwar people got indicted. Not one sheriff or police got indicted, even though they beat people.

I was one of the seven indicted, in my case for aiding and abetting the stopping of the train, a California State felony punishable by up to five years in prison. We called ourselves the Del Mar Seven. Because I hadn't been involved in the planning of this action and I had a lot of support and witnesses

and a good lawyer, I didn't think I would get convicted. However there were four major witnesses against me, all undercover sheriffs who had infiltrated different movements and radical organizations including an underground newspaper although I did not know them. One other defendant got 30 days, and Peter Mahone, who became a close friend of mine, was convicted and served a year for a parole violation. I found out later that one of the demonstrators at Del Mar was an undercover San Diego cop who actually had written a report saying I wasn't an organizer of this action, but that report was suppressed, which is illegal.

Note: I believed and still do that stopping a train with war supplies was a righteous action although disagreed with how this action was planned, not letting the attendees know the risks involved in attending.

I went to prison in early January, 1973 for what was called 90-day observation, where at the end of 90 days the judge could sentence me to probation or return me to prison. I had a lot of supporters. Noam Chomsky got many signatures on a petition on my behalf in support of my release. I was sent to the state prison in Chino. The San Diego sheriffs, who transported me from the San Diego jail to the prison in San Bernardino County in shackles told the guards at Chino that I would organize the other inmates against them. So they put me in solitary. It was a very tough solitary, they called an Adjustment Center. At that time, there were four in the whole state of California. The one at Chino was all Mexican and white. It was totally segregated and very anti-Black.

You only got out of your cell an hour a day or less to walk between the cells and take a shower. Inmates would yell through the bars, "What are you in for?" I would say, "For anti-Vietnam War protests." They would say, "Are you a revolutionary?" There was yelling all night. My background was very different. Most inmates had been imprisoned by the California Youth Authority and had spent much of their lives in gangs and prison. Some had killed people inside the prison. They kept saying to me, "Are you a revolutionary?" I would say, "I'm in for antiwar demonstrations." They said, "You couldn't be in the Palm Hall (the name of the prison wing in Chino where solitary was located) for antiwar demonstrations."

I remember one day, I walked out and this guy grabbed me through his cell. He had a knife. I didn't have any weapons, but almost everybody else did. He said, "We know you're one of those revolutionists, but because you're white, we are going to let you live," and he showed me his knife. I was scared out of my mind. It was a pretty tough period. I got out of solitary after 10 days with not so veiled threats from the prison administration, not to organize.

I was returned to the San Diego jail in March, 1967 in order to go in front of the court again. My case was very high profile in San Diego. I am very proud about the following. I had a lawyer that represented me in my resentencing named Roger Ruffin. He had been a respected judge in San Diego, but had been hounded off the court by right-wingers because they claimed that he loved the Black Panthers and gave too light sentences or low bail to Black and Latinx defendants. Roger Ruffin talked to the presiding judge about my sentencing, which was up to five years, before this second sentencing. Ruffin told me that the judge said, "If Peter Bohmer will renounce direct action, illegal protests, we will give him probation. Otherwise he will get the five-year sentence."

I have always been more of a justice person than a law person. I thought about what I should do while being locked up in the San Diego County jail and I knew my statement would be in the mainstream media; the *LA Times* had covered my case almost daily, so had the San Diego newspapers and TV stations. So I told my lawyer my decision "I won't make such a statement even if means more prison time". Because I thought to publicly denounce direct action and doing what is right even if it is not legal, is absolutely the wrong message to send out. In prison, they make me talk to a psychologist to study my criminal and violent tendencies. There, I felt I could say almost anything to help me get out because it was private. In a public venue, I wasn't willing to in any way discourage direct action against injustice, even if meant more prison time.

Because I had so much public support- many letters to the court, the petition, started by Noam Chomsky and even the prison recommending no more prison time, I got a stiff probation but no more prison time. I had been out of prison and jail for about a week and was staying that night at a close friends' house. At about five in the morning the police came to the door without identifying themselves. A resident of the apartment opened the door when they said, "We're friends of Peter," and they came charging in. I mentioned having guns for self-defense, but as a felon, you can't have a weapon. I had sold the gun to a friend of mine, who was in the apartment with me where I was staying. I was just staying because it got so late. I don't know how they knew I was there, but I got busted on a felony possession of a weapon and possession of marijuana which a guest brought into the house after I went to sleep.

All of us in the apartment were arrested and I spent another week in jail because I was on probation. I then went back to court, and this time, a different judge gave me "the choice" after having found I violated my probation because of the gun, either I could serve my sentence—it was an indeterminate one to five year sentence—or I could get an advanced degree. I wasn't unique. Another

friend of mine who was a leader in the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP), when I later went to complete my Ph. D had the same conditions on his probation. I agreed to this unusual condition. I also had to do write daily reports and report weekly and would be sent back to prison for violating my probation if I attended a demonstration where the law was broken

In 1975, I was still living in San Diego. I worked at the Center for Radical Education (CRE), its original name was Center for Radical Economics. When I was in prison in 1973, three of the radical economics faculty at San Diego State University, John Hardesty, Clint Jencks and Norris Clement, took the leading in forming this center, so that I would have a position when I got out of prison. They raised a little bit of money and found a good sized house that we shared with an anti-war Vietnamese family. CRE had a lot of study groups, both practical like self-defense, how to do divorce, how to get out of the military but also on Marxism, Latin America, organizing skills. One group read Paolo Freire's, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. We had as many as 10 study groups at a time, weekly programs of a speaker or film, we had a library with books and two file cabinets of articles, a mimeograph machine which we used to make fliers and print our monthly newsletter. I was the staff person and had to raise my \$150 monthly salary, which was hard to live on in the early and mid-1970's.

I also had other jobs, but it was hard for me to find work and my economic situation was difficult. I got some of my FBI files later. I had to work as part of the conditions of my probation, but as revealed in my FBI files, often when I applied for a job or got one, the FBI or San Diego police would visit the employer and say that I was a Communist and you don't want a Communist working for you and I would lose the job or not even get hired.

In spring 1975, I was afraid that I would go back to prison or more likely have my probation renewed past 1976 because I wasn't completing my Ph. D. which was a condition of my probation. I didn't have a good relation with MIT and the economics department there, where I had studied. I might have gone back to school eventually, but my probation speeded up the process. The San Diego Court probably thought this condition would either get me out of California or by getting me back into the university, I'd be less effective. In retrospect, I believe that I have contributed more to building social movements and radicalizing people as a college teacher than I would have if I had not returned to get my Ph.D. I love teaching and did it whether I got paid for doing it or not.

I applied to complete my Ph.D. in economics at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and the University of California, Berkeley. I got into both places. I loved Berkeley, and San Francisco, the Bay Area is my favorite part of the country, culturally, it's such a beautiful area. I was afraid I would be too

swept up by the activism there and not complete my dissertation. I thought if I went to U Mass, I would just study and get my dissertation very quickly—because I already was all but doctorate (ABD)—but it took me many years. That’s how I left San Diego and moved to Northampton, Mass. In 1976, I started going to U Mass.

**Zaragoza:** You got your PhD there.

**Bohmer:** Yes, although it took me a long time. I got off probation way before I finished my doctoral dissertation. I had a really hard time writing it, partly because once I figure something out, I lose interest in writing it up. Secondly, the academic form, given my background of intense activism, when you have for other academics was foreign to me.

At first, I thought I would do a dissertation on the Mexica-U.S. border and the cause and impact of Mexican migration to the U.S. I had gotten very involved in San Diego in a group I helped form, the Mexican Information Group (MIG). We started by supporting social movements and radical organizations in Tijuana, just across the border who faced a lot of repression. At that time and I believe, still today, there were thousands of people who were Mexicans living in Tijuana but working in San Diego during the day, and they would cross back into Tijuana after work. We would give them leaflets in Spanish about social movements and organizing and land occupations going on in Tijuana and Baja California. In addition we sometimes helped people just after they had crossed the border at night by driving them past immigration officers or stops.

My plan was to do a doctoral dissertation on the supply of Mexican labor and U.S. employer demand—why people leave Mexico, and then the economic conditions here. However, after entering the U Mass economics department, I was disappointed and angered by the following. All of the graduate students were Marxists—it’s not true today, but it was true in the late ‘70s—and almost half the faculty were. In theory, there was a lot of interest in gender and in class—not necessarily in practice. However, much less in racism and anti-racism.

Many of the students and faculty told me I was really obsessed with racism. I remember once talking to another mentor, Ted Allen, and I said to him, “Many economics students and faculty at the University of Massachusetts tell me that I am obsessed with racism, what do you think,” He said, “Did anybody non-white ever say that to you?” And I said, “No.” Then he said, “The next time somebody says that to you, say, ‘If you could be a little bit more obsessed with racism, I could be a little bit less.’” That really stuck with me.

I was frustrated and angered by the lack of interest, both theory and practice on past and present U.S. racism. I am not trying to romanticize activists of the 1960's and 1970's, but most of us, including white activists, and the related organizations put anti-racism and the struggle for racial justice as central to our praxis. So I decided the political economy of racism was going to be my focus. I assumed that to be a leftist, to be a radical, to be anti-capitalist included making central, anti-racism, and anti-white supremacy. Sadly this wasn't shared. So that's when I decided to do a dissertation on the political economy racism.

My first topic, which I worked on but didn't finish was studying the Chicago area steel mills. I wanted to show the difference between Black, Latino and European immigrant mobility in the steel mills. My hypothesis was that first- generation European immigrants had similar jobs to Black and Mexican background —this would be around 1890's, basically the worst and most dangerous jobs. But over time, the white workers ended up still primarily, working-class, at least the numbers I had, but more in safer jobs, better-paying, more skilled jobs. The Latinos, and particularly the Black workers, stayed in the worst jobs.

**Zaragoza:** And whites mainly in control of the union.

**Bohmer:** Definitely. I looked at all the areas you grew up in, Chicago, Gary, but I didn't have that much support from the faculty and my interest waned a little, so I didn't finish. I did work on that for about a year, and I was trying to show the difference between "race" and ethnicity, and how racism, particularly against African-Americans was far more institutionalized than against European immigrants although they often faced discrimination but it was less systemic—there a lot of commonality, but there are really important differences, too. I also worked for a while in how "race" and racism were analyzed in the history of economic thought but also didn't complete the topic.

Martha Tapia was one of my Spanish teachers in 1973-1974 at San Diego State University where I was studying intensive Spanish. She was from Mexico and came to the United States in the early 1960's when her father, who was a Purepecha organizer in Michoacán was killed by the Mexican military in a struggle to prevent Purepecha land from being stolen. Martha came to San Diego County and then began her studies at San Diego State in fall, 1968. I was four years older than her. I liked her a lot and we got romantically involved. Most of the activists I knew in this period, late 1960's through mid-1970's —including women I was going out with—were somewhat anti-intellectual. It was a period when actions were emphasized. I have always been an intellectual person who reads a lot. I have never felt totally comfortable in either the academic world or the activist world. Martha was a supporter of my

studying and thinking. We got married in April, 1977. We had like four kids together although got divorced in 1992. Sadly she died of cancer in 2000.

Our last few years in Massachusetts, Martha worked at the women's center at the University of Massachusetts. She was preparing for a talk for International Women's Day and mentioned to me that she found that only two per cent of corporate managers were Black. Even though I was very aware of what I called the racial division of labor and of institutionalized racism, I was amazed how low this percentage was. I thought perhaps it was an exaggeration. Martha was usually very accurate with data, so I started researching it. I found there were a significant number of African Americans in managerial and administrative jobs in the public sector, but not in the private sector.

So that ended up becoming the basis of my doctoral dissertation. My hypothesis was that as a response to the social movements of the 1960s, especially the Civil Rights and Black Freedom and Black Liberation movements, the government at all levels responded by significantly increasing Black employment. For example, the Kerner Commission, set up to understand the urban rebellions of the 1960's, called for the federal government to hire one million African-Americans to stabilize the country. I showed that because of these social movements, there had been real improvements in the quantity and quality of jobs for African-Americans in federal, state and local level government employment, although not racial equality; but far more than in the private sector, especially for Black women. The cause was not the common neoclassical economics analysis that a capitalist economy generates strong tendencies for racial equality and the overcoming of racial discrimination. If markets generate strong tendencies for racial equality we would have expected improvements especially in the private sector but this was not the case, remember that only 2% of managers were African-Americans although they were about 12% of the labor force.

The improvements were really significant, not as great as mainstream economists said, but they were major in terms of class composition, they were significant in terms of income. By class composition, I mean a significant growth of Blacks in the professional-managerial class in the public sector. These major improvements never really closed the racial unemployment gap. With the decline of these social movements in the mid to late 1970s—my data goes through 1984— and I completed my dissertation in 1985, the progress towards racial equality had stopped. The end of progress was also caused by the major recessions of 1973-1975 and the early 1980's. Sam Bowles, who was very helpful, was my dissertation adviser. It took me over 400 pages. I read and synthesized a lot of writings on



racism, developed a model on the relation between the public and private sector, and was very careful with the data I found and analyzed.

It took forever. I was teaching at the time, and I had three kids while working on my Ph.D., my daughter Josina, born in 1977, and my sons, Inti, born in 1978, and Filemón, all born in western Massachusetts. I was also active there in the anti-apartheid and against U.S. intervention in Central America movements. Because we were low income, even though highly educated, we lived for six years in public housing, Hampton Gardens, and it was some of the better organizing that I have done. We linked issues connecting mistreatment of tenants, who were mainly women to issues of racial, gender and class oppression, nationally and globally. There was a significant population of Puerto Ricans, tenants, probably 40 percent of the 200 plus adults there. Residents in Northampton sometimes called it the ghetto, but it was at least one half white. Northampton is a very white city.

We organized there. Martha was active, I was also, although not as much as her. We organized an active tenants union. Many tenants got actively involved in the tenants union. We had monthly meetings and tried to talk to each tenant about their concerns and were somewhat successful, connecting international issues to direct tenant concerns. I saw both in San Diego and at Hampton Gardens in Northampton, Massachusetts the idea that working-class and poor people are not interested in things beyond their own personal lives was wrong and elitist. I think you can link people's actual daily problems such as in this case, sexual harassment or lack of snow removal at Hampton Gardens to national and global issues that affect people we are organizing less directly such as the U.S. wars in Central America, or the U.S. overthrowing the Allende led government in Chile, poor and working class people are interested and can make the connection. For example in the summer, we showed films outside because there was limited transportation from Hampton Gardens and limited spending money. For example, once we showed a film about El Salvador and the U.S. support for the murderous and repressive military and the wealthy there. The audience was mainly Puerto Rican, many did know much about El Salvador before our film series. I remember after one of the films a few people saying, "they speak Spanish, they look like us." There was much interest afterward in learning more about El Salvador, the U.S. role there, and what they could do. I mainly tried to organize and mobilize the white tenants, including challenging racism, although the tenants unions was primarily Puerto Rican. Like in San Diego, I also of course also reached out a lot to Blacks and Latinos, especially in community education.

I remember in San Diego, the Socialist President, Salvador Allende, and the left coalition, Unidad Popular in Chile, that he had been overthrown by a very violent US-backed military coup on September 11, 1973. To me, that September 11, is the one I am most emotionally connected to. Also, there was much interest in working class Chicano communities in San Diego that I spoke to about Chile in the two years after the coup and about the ensuing brutal military dictatorship. Many who attended were quite well paid workers in the trades and heavy industry, but they were primarily, working-class Mexican men and women. They were really interested in Chile, too, but, of course, connecting it to their own lives. I mention this to again challenge the conventional wisdom that working-class people are not interested in U.S. intervention abroad and what is happening in other countries.

**Zaragoza:** To go back to one point, it is the linkage and commonality which are absolutely essential, I think, for poor and working-class people to get into these wider global struggles, not, as I often see at Evergreen, leading with the other places.

**Bohmer:** That's definitely right. I am with you on that. Like in the housing project and our organizing there, one of our original issues was lack of maintenance. There were cases where they didn't remove the snow and two women who were Puerto Rican broke their leg when they fell in the ice. I reached out to the white tenants to get them to join an occupation of the manager's office over this. It was easier to reach the Puerto Rican tenants because a lot of the white tenants felt way more guilty about living in public housing.

**Zaragoza:** Stigmatized almost.

**Bohmer:** Definitely. But we totally started with people's direct needs and complaints, and then began bringing in South Africa, El Salvador, etc. It was effective.

**Zaragoza:** How did you come to Evergreen? That seems like that's the next step.

**Bohmer:** In 1984, although I still hadn't finished my dissertation, I applied for teaching positions at several universities. I had never heard of Evergreen until one of my last years at U Mass. There was an economics grad student there named Sue Feiner, who had gone to Evergreen, and it sounded like an interesting place. I wrote them in 1984, but there weren't any openings.

I got offers at a few branch campuses of Penn State University. I got offered and took a job at Penn State, McKeesport, a working-class city near Pittsburgh, that the steel companies had largely abandoned. At one time, it had been a sizable city with steady employment in the steel mills. Beginning in the mid to late 1970's, and continuing into the early 1980's, many of the steel mills had closed or severely downsized. McKeesport had been a center of what is called the Mon-Valley, along the

Monongahela River, around Pittsburgh. It was right by Homestead, Clairton, Duquesne. There was depression levels of unemployment when I got there in the fall of 1984. You could see a lot of people hanging out on the streets during the day.

McKeesport was still the size of Olympia of the mid 1980's. Yet, there were no movie theaters open, no hotels, many closed businesses and abandoned houses. I lived in Pittsburgh, but I worked in McKeesport. My classes were heavily populated by sons and daughters of steelworkers and other manufacturing, e.g., from a nearby chemical plant, so children of blue-collar workers were a major demographic. It was a good learning experience for me.

I taught at Penn State-McKeesport for three years. It was difficult to develop a radical political economic analysis among the students. I was probably the most popular teacher personally because I respected the students. Most of the teachers there, sadly, would talk about how stupid the students were, which bothered me a lot. I was also the head of the union there, and I remember how faculty would talk how unfair it was these steelworkers were making more money than them. I remember at one faculty union meeting, asking "Would anybody want to switch jobs?" Not one person would. Also, —I resigned over this—I advocated for including adjuncts in the union, that it was right morally and economically. The full-time faculty in a close vote, voted not to accept part-time faculty into our union. That's when I resigned as President.

In early 1987, I got a letter. I'm not a believer in fate but the letter was addressed to me in Pittsburgh but with an incorrect address. I lived on the longest street in Pittsburgh. It was addressed 40 blocks ---away, but it came to me. I don't know how they had an address. The letter mentioned there was an opening at Evergreen in the Master's in Public Administration (MPA) program, and encouraged me to apply for it. So, I did, and it was kind of a stretch because I'm much more of a social movement person as a cause of progressive and radical change than change coming from good public administrators. My only experience, working in government, I had worked for the Sandinistas—the FSLN—for the government in Nicaragua for their Social Security Administration. The Nicaraguan government had wanted me to work for a year there, but because of family, I couldn't afford it. But I did work there for three months. I didn't do a very good job. I was trying to figure out—and they asked me to—in the areas of country where the Contras, the people that the US supported, who were fighting the Sandinistas, whether the social programs were going there or not.

Between the combination of my being not fully fluent in Spanish, and me being this white guy from the United States, some people in INSSBI (the social security ministry) where I worked, didn't trust

me. Plus, the data being inadequate made my research difficult. I concluded that there had been improvement in people's lives in these areas, rural, through the programs INSSBI administered- childcare programs, senior citizen food programs, social welfare. However most of the resources went to the cities and much less to the rural areas. So my own experience as a public administrator was very, very limited.

But anyway, I was offered and accepted a faculty position in the MPA program at Evergreen and got here in early September, 1987. I think I wasn't the first choice. I taught in the MPA program for a total of four years and one quarter. I liked teaching the undergraduates more and it fit more my purpose of being a teacher. With the graduate program, I was somewhat effective in liberalizing students by focusing as much as I could on the causes and impact of poverty, racism and economic inequality and on strategies to challenge these major problems of our society. It's better that people are liberal than conservative. My teaching philosophy has always been based not only on encouraging critical analysis but also in furthering empathy and solidarity with the oppressed. Also, I am more interested in encouraging long-run participation in transformative social movements and radicalization than in liberalizing people. Thus, I fit better into the undergraduate program although I enjoy teaching older students which were more common in the MPA program. My first year in MPA. I alienated some of the students by my criticisms of the professional-managerial class and my openly anti-capitalist and anti-racist perspective but I had less of these problems after my first year.

While part of the MPA program, I proposed to the students and faculty, a track or specialization within the program of learning to be an organizer for economic and social justice organizations, and also for making the analysis of systemic racism and anti-racism a more central part of the curriculum. Most of the students supported these ideas. but the faculty, most of them, said, "We have no idea how to teach that, so we can't support it." So it didn't go through.

Then I began teaching in the undergraduate program. That's what I have mainly done for most of the last 30 years. I think the last time I taught MPA was in 2001.

**Zaragoza:** What were some of your first impressions and early experiences at Evergreen?

**Bohmer:** Even before I got to Evergreen. I was impressed by the students. When I ate in the cafeteria at Penn State, most discussions I heard were about football, dating, and cars. There was little discussion about current events, about what kind of world we wanted, or major economic and social problems., or what they were learning. There was some and I met many of them inside and outside of class but it was

a tiny proportion. When I visited Evergreen as a job candidate for a position teaching in the MPA program, it was winter 1987, it was a long three-day interview process. I was asked to give a few talks and did many interviews.. I remember going to the delicatessen a few time in the CAB building and hearing students talk knowledgeably about South Africa, about Central America, about ideas. It was inspiring to me. I thought this is the kind of school I want to teach at. I had a very positive impression of the students at Evergreen during this visit which has continued for 32 years. .

Like I said, at Penn State, I was popular personally, but my ideas didn't fit that well in terms of students. There was a few that I reached, but even though most of them hated the steel company executives— even violently in some cases in terms of the words—but it wasn't against executives or corporations in general. It was very much only against US Steel, which was a big company, or USX, and probably half or more of my students wanted to become managers. I don't know how many became that, given the class background, but that was the desire.

At Evergreen, I just felt I could relate to the people better, even in the MPA program. As I mentioned earlier, I had problems my first year and to a lesser extent my second years because many of the white MPA students resented by strong emphasis on the continuing centrality of institutional racism. My analysis of class relations were influenced strongly by a seminal article by John and Barbara Ehrenreich on the Professional-Managerial class. They argue convincingly that in contemporary U.S. capitalism, there are four classes- the working-class, the professional managerial class (PMC) a small business class and a capitalist class. They theorize that the professional-managerial class (PMC) which arose with the growth of monopoly capitalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has major contradictions with the capitalist class but they focus on its contradictions with the working class. Many of the MPA students, were either members of the PMC or more likely aspiring members of this class. The students who were most hostile to me were those who most identified as professional administrators. It wasn't a divide between liberal or conservative. The men who were usually dressed up in suits, or the women with a very professional attire usually disliked me. I never mean it a personal attack on them, full-time faculty like me are part of the professional-managerial. I should have been more empathetic and made more clear I was arguing for a recognition of class differences but also for a principled alliance between workers and the PMC. There was also hostility towards me by some white students because of my foregrounding the centrality of racism which I was openly attacked by a few MPA students and also for my emphasis on social movements but altogether I enjoyed my teaching in the MPA program and the students.

I am not in agreement with the de-emphasis in recent years of political economy in MPA. The program I taught most frequently in MPA was the first program students took; it was required, an eight credit program called, The Political Economic Context of Public Administration. I always used Howard Zinn's, *A People's History of the United States*, my favorite book of all time, which gave students a very different understanding of U.S. history, one that focused on the history of oppression and resistance. I don't think this program exists today, certainly not for eight credits.

My first year at Evergreen in 1987-1988, I got very active in organizing against what the Higher Education Board (the HEC Board) was promoting, it was called the Master Plan. It was an attempt to make higher education Washington more like California, to further the class divide between the community colleges, state colleges, and universities. It called for institutionalizing more resources going to the state colleges than the community colleges and of course the most spending going UW and WSU where the wealthier students would be concentrated with standardized testing playing the a major role in determining admittance and even graduation. Even though some of this was already the reality, I was very active in opposing this plan and view of higher education as mainly to serve the needs of corporations and played a major role in forming a group at Evergreen opposing this plan and organizing and mobilizing against it. For example we disrupted the Trustees of the HEC Board when they met at the Double Tree Hotel near Seatac Airport. So even from the beginning, there were some attempts to fire me away because of my activism. This actual plan was not formally instituted although many aspects of it have been even put into effect.

**Zaragoza:** At Evergreen?

**Bohmer:** Students at Evergreen were especially opposed to it because of its emphasis on standardized testing,

**Zaragoza:** Do you want to talk more about attempts to fire or silence you.

**Bohmer:** In the 1989-1990 school year, I remember a student in the MPA program, Karla Wulfsberg complained about me to the president at Evergreen and demanded I be fired. I was teaching a class in public policy, and I would always ask who the public is, as in public administrators, as in public policy. I learned this from a good friend and fellow teacher in MPA, Dan Leahy. Is the public, the government or is it the people? I would often talk about public service as opposed to public administration. I also claimed that public administrator can do the most good if people are protesting, demonstrating, doing direct action, and doing grass roots organizing and mobilizing. The public administrator and officials

should share the relevant information they are privy to, to the social movements dealing with these issues and about the relevant public agency. It was a dialectic or progressive and mutually useful connection between people inside the government who can help support the grass roots movements and pass on useful information. Simultaneously the movements, individuals and groups outside the government structure, e.g. poor people's organizations, by their and their actions made possible more autonomy, could create an environment and possibility for public administrators, who are interested in economic justice and racial and gender justice to have a progressive impact on public policy. Militant movements and action encourage public officials and administrators to be more courageous.

In my presentation in this public policy class on what I called the insider-outsider dialectic, I gave as a positive example the case of Daniel Ellsberg, who was high up in the RAND Corporation which did research primarily for the Air Force. Ellsberg was commissioned to do a secret study on the Vietnam war. He passed on this study, which was a powerful in-depth critique of the U.S. role in the Vietnam War to major newspapers and to its credit, the New York Times and then other papers, printed it, The Pentagon Papers. Karla made a formal complaint against me to the Evergreen administration and the MPA head, claiming that I said the only useful thing a public administrator could do was commit treason like Dan Ellsberg had. My point was that the opposition to the Vietnam War had led him to turn against it and to have the courage to get the Pentagon Papers published and in turn this publication, which revealed consistent government lies further strengthened and broadened the movement against the Vietnam War.

To its credit, the MPA faculty supported me. I remember the head of MPA at that time, Pris Bowerman, saying they wouldn't like too many people like me at Evergreen, activists and radicals, but having a few was good. I always felt a mixed relationship with the faculty.

In the late 1980's and continuing into the 1990's, I was active in organizing on the campus, mainly with students, particularly around affirmative action, more equality, and more access for working-class students. I also got active in the community. A good friend of mine, Larry Mosqueda, came to Evergreen, two years after me, in fall 1989. Angela Gilliam, who I was also close to politically and personally came in 1988. The faculty which had been overwhelmingly "white" became more diverse, racially. There is no golden age at Evergreen, when I arrived the student body and faculty was less diverse than it is today and there is still a long way to go.

I was also active at Evergreen and in the community against U.S. intervention in Central America and in solidarity with revolutionary movements in El Salvador and Guatemala and the

revolutionary government in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas. I went to Nicaragua in the summer of 1988, partly to establish a sister university relation with the main public university in Managua, UNAN, with Evergreen. We had a very good provost at that time named Patrick Hill, a left liberation theology oriented Catholic who grew up nearby to me in Queens, NY although we didn't know each other. He had really supported my being hired and had supported my summer visit to Managua, Nicaragua to establish our relationship with the university there. Although UNAN was very interested, the relationship with Evergreen never got finalized, partly because Patrick Hill was fired as provost by President Joe Olander and the Sandinistas lost the election in 1990.

I remember once at a faculty meeting—the provost, Patrick Hill said, “Every school should have a niche. Ours should be around economic and social justice and that should be incorporated and play a central role in the curriculum and in our marketing. He had limited support from the faculty. I believe his idea is even more important today as a way to turn around our declining enrollment by giving Evergreen more of a distinct identity. Patrick Hill supported the hiring of more faculty of color and people like me, who were also activists, so I have a lot of gratitude to him.

I was very active in the Olympia anti-intervention coalition, which had been primarily focused on U.S. intervention in Central America but by late summer, 1990 had changed its focus to opposing the looming U.S. war against Iraq.

It was clear that George Bush, Sr. was going to go to war with Iraq. Under Saddam Hussein, Iraq had invaded Kuwait in the summer of 1990. I thought as did many others that the United States did not want a negotiated settlement. The United States was committed to go to war—partly as a way of overturning the strong antiwar consciousness resulting from Vietnam, the Vietnam syndrome, the dreaded disease that affected many people in the U.S.—there strong aversion to the U.S. going to war. I threw myself into speaking up, going to endless meetings and organizing a major protest against the U.S. attacking Iraq.

We had a demonstration on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1991 against the war when we knew the United States attack on Iraq was imminent. There were about 3,000 people who marched—at least that is what the Olympia and Seattle papers said. We began with a rally in Sylvester Park in downtown Olympia. We demanded the State of Washington Legislature pass a resolution taking a stand against the war. We marched in the street to the Capitol, maybe 800 of us got inside the Legislative Council chambers while they were meeting by various means. Our occupation got bad publicity, partly for minimal property damage, more for occupying the House of Representatives chamber. Some of the bad publicity was



directed against me. I thought it was a very important demonstration but I was against property damage inside the legislative chamber that we were occupying. To me, it would confuse the issue and it would not help us build anti-war support or our movement. I am not abstractly for or against damage of corporate or government property, it is to me a tactical issue, not wrong ethically.

Some of the occupiers were carving graffiti into the desks of legislators. Almost all of the legislators left when we entered this space. So I got up on one of the legislator's desks, I think that of the speaker of the Washington State House of Representatives, I've never seen the video of it, but a friend of mine, Tom Wright, has a video of the occupation including my actions. This image of me supposedly shouting while on the desk was in many Washington State newspapers and on TV, e.g., in Seattle. Actually, I got on the desk to be heard and said, "It's a people's assembly. We're here to oppose the war, but we're not here to destroy property." That was hardly reported, only the image of me standing on the desks was reported and shown. Over the course of the night, people began to leave gradually and the small group that stayed all night and into the morning, finally decided to leave by 9 am. Heavy U.S. bombing of Iraq and the U.S. invasion began the day after our occupation, January 16, 1991.

This action was a last minute plea for the U.S. not to go to war but the mainstream media overwhelmingly supported the U.S. going war which contributed to the negative way we were portrayed. Many high school students and even middle schools students joined our march and rally. There was a march from Evergreen to Sylvester Park that began the morning of January 15<sup>th</sup> as part of this day of planned action. School administrators locked the doors of the two schools the Evergreen students marched by, Jefferson Middle School and Capital High School in order to prevent their students from joining. Nevertheless many middle and high school students jumped or climbed out from windows and marched to Sylvester Park with the Evergreen students who marched six miles to the rally at Sylvester Park.

A few legislators demanded I be fired from Evergreen for my role in the occupation. The acting President, Les Purce, in a letter to some legislators, who released it to the local newspaper, *The Olympian*, wrote that he strongly condemned my behavior and it wasn't appropriate for faculty but I was doing this on my time, not when I was supposed to be teaching so he couldn't discipline or fire me. I think someone like Les Purce, if he could have, he would have fired me in two seconds, and also Larry Mosqueda, who was also very active, but we had a lot of support from faculty and students. I believe the faculty passed a resolution criticizing his comments about me. Purce as Evergreen President always

tried to stop any involvement by Evergreen on issues, actions that went beyond the campus and stated this openly. I totally disagree, I believe this is our social responsibility.

End of Part I.