LOW ROAD TO HIGHLANDER

An Editorial

Kurt W. Clausen
Editor-in-Chief

It's amazing how a bright fire, once extinguished, can make everything seem all the darker for a moment. Such was the case with the recent attack on the Tennessee icon of participatory action research, *Highlander Research and Education Center*.

Back in 2016, attendees at the annual conference of the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA) were extended the invitation to take a tour of the Center, and many international visitors were happy to learn of its work and history, dating back almost 90 years. It had originated as the Highlander Folk School, co-founded in 1932 at Mouteagle, Tennessee by the activist educators Myles Horton and Don West, and the Methodist minister James Dombrowski. Highly influenced by the folk school movement of Denmark, Highlander's mission soon went beyond the bounds of *regular* adult education:

...Highlander's programs were based upon the conviction that education could be used to help ordinary people build upon the knowledge they had gained from experience and work collectively toward a more democratic and humane society. This approach made the adult education center a source of inspiration and the most controversial school in modern Tennessee history. (Glen, 2017)

With a desire to tie education directly to the community, the school focused on residential workshops revolving around concrete subjects largely determined by the students themselves. Rather than receiving examinations, grades, and degrees, students made their own plans for reform to be commenced when they returned to their home community. In such a manner, the faculty at Highlander envisioned the work they did in labour education,

literacy, and leadership as a catalyst for future action. Until the post-war period, the school's focus was on helping unionized workers and developing programs to promote the labour movement. Soon, the staff was intervening in coal and textile strikes.

By the 1950s, Highlander's interests included the issues of civil rights and desegregation, attracting some of the most important figures of the movement: Martin Luther King Jr.; Rosa Parks; Anne Braden; and Ella Baker. Through literacy programs, the school aided Blacks who were prevented from registering to vote due to literacy requirements at the time. Workshops dealing with community-wide integration attracted masses of activists as they explored new ways to legitimately protest the *status quo*. Highlander's music director Zilphia Horton (Myles Horton's wife) has even been attributed with adapting the gospel song "We Shall Overcome" to become the civil rights anthem (after being taken up by Pete Seeger). Support was given to the school by the country's numerous reform groups that included Eleanor Roosevelt and Reinhold Niebuhr. Many saw it as the undisputed birthplace of the civil rights movement.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that from the start the school was a target of criticism and enmity from many segments of society: politicians, industrialists and newspapers. Threats and denunciations became part of their daily mail, and these were accompanied by direct assaults on staff and facilities throughout its early existence. Petitions by anti-communist and white segregationists led to an investigation by the state legislature, trials, and the ultimate closure of the school. Its charter was revoked; its property confiscated and auctioned off by the State in 1961. The vacant buildings had already been burned to the ground, presumably by arson – though unproven (see Glen, 1988, pp. 184-209).

Undaunted, Highlander's leaders had secured a new charter for the present *Highlander Research and Education Center* before its predecessor had even been shuttered. Based in Knoxville, it maintained its same goals, and expanded its operations. And, it was here that Highlander experienced its most violent reactions from critics. Historian John Glen, in his book *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932–1962*, describes in detail how during this time the buildings were sites of repeated vandalism, firebombs, and burglaries. At the height of the backlash in the mid-1960s, the Center even witnessed a defiant KKK parade in front of its campus. Harassment soon ceased, however, after Highlander moved to the bucolic town of New Market, Tennessee in 1971. Continuing to pursue issues of relevance to the changing times, the site maintained a relatively low public profile, acting as much as a "living Legacy" of its radical past as a present-day training center. This was the vision that was seen by the ARNA group as they toured the grounds.

Such is the trick that time plays on us. We begin to see such sacred places as museums of the past, and think to ourselves, "Thank goodness that's all over and dealt with!" The people who fought for and against it are now all dead, and we look complacently upon the

site as something disconnected from our reality. For this reason, we believe that we are spectators rather than participants.

Yet, in the blink of an eye, we are reminded just how closely connected we are to the entire spectrum of not only the school's existence, but to the history of educational reform itself. In the small hours of March 29th of this year, a virulent fire destroyed the central Administrative Building at Highlander. While no one was hurt, many of the Center's historical documents and records were destroyed (thankfully the bulk of Highlander's material is kept in the Archives in Madison, Wisconsin). Was it arson? Police authorities have, once again, reserved judgement; Political authorities remain largely silent. However, on a stone located near the gutted building was spray-painted an increasingly familiar "hash-tag"-like symbol of Romania's Iron Guard movement. It had been used in the 1930's by Eastern European Fascists, it had been carved into the butt of the gun used by the Christchurch mosque shooter, and (closer to home) it has been connected to the recently disbanded Traditionalist Worker Party, a self-proclaimed white supremacist group.

What caused this attack? And, why now? Highlander's mission has remained unchanged throughout its existence: *[To serve] as a catalyst for grassroots organizing and movement building in Appalachia and the South. We work with people fighting for justice, equality and sustainability, supporting their efforts to take collective action to shape their own destiny* (<https://www.highlandercenter.org/our-story/mission/>). Was the centre attacked specifically due to its accent on Participatory Action Research?

PAR challenges the belief that only academics or trained professionals can produce accurate information, and instead recognizes information as POWER and puts that power in the hands of people seeking to overcome problems in their daily lives. PAR is a collective process of investigation, empowerment, and action. The people most affected by the problems, sometimes with the help of 'experts', share information and knowledge, investigate and analyze the issues, and ultimately act together to bring about meaningful, long-term solutions (ibid).

Of course, it is highly unlikely that a group of snobbish academics stormed the building to vent their wrath on the *hoi polloi* of research. The Center's history of civil rights activism, and perhaps more specifically, its recent work on immigration rights, would seem to be the greater motivating factor. Nevertheless, these two missions of empowerment and participatory action research listed in the Center's website emerge from the same root and are open to the same response from certain circles: as an affront to those who believe that only *certain* members of society are entitled to *certain* privileges; be it a job, a vote, or the credibility to undertake research.

So, it would be safe to say that the timing of the attack did not emerge from any repercussions to a change in Highlander's message. Rather, it seems to lie in the sea

changes that the world itself has undergone in recent years, allowing it to revolve once more on its axis to return to a now familiar spot. Ethno-nationalism, Islamophobia, anti-immigration, anti-Semitism, attacks on reproductive freedoms, and massive cuts to education may all seem very contemporary – and unrelated. However, the impetus of all such growth in violence stems from a seemingly never-ending cycle, coaxed out of the darkness once again by manipulative tongues and desperate minds. The journalist W.T. Whitney (2019) likened the recent attacks at synagogues, mosques and schools to fire bells in the night. This description is especially apt for Highlander.

In looking at the Center's history, however, one cannot doubt its resilience, and this bodes well for its continuance into the future. Despite the loss of its main building, Highlander intends to soon start construction of a new library, named for one of their members and civil-rights icon, Septima Clark. As Myles Horton stated when the original school was closed down in 1961: "You can padlock a facility, but you can't padlock an idea." Similarly, you can burn down a building, but you can't contain its drifting embers. Hopefully this message will not be lost on the action research community, who should be periodically reminded that their work is never seen as neutral. ■■

Helpful Sources:

Glen, John M. (2017). Highlander Folk School. In Carroll Van West (ed). *The Tennessee Encyclopedia*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press. <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/highlander-folk-school/>

Glen, John M. (1988). *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932–1962*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988.

Jones, Sarah, (April 6, 2019). At Famed Civil-Rights Center, Fire Destroys a Building, But Not a Mission. *The Intelligencer*. <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/04/highlander-center-fire-destroys-building-not-its-mission.html>

Mervosh, Sarah (April 3, 2019). 'White Power' Symbol was Found at Site of Fire, Civil Rights Center Says. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/03/us/civil-rights-center-fire.html>

Whitney, W.T. (April 8, 2019). The Burning of Highlander Center: A Fascist-like Attack. *Counterpunch*. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2019/04/08/the-burning-of-highlander-center-a-fascist-like-attack/>