



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Review: Philadelphia Fire

Reviewed Work(s): *The MOVE Crisis in Philadelphia: Extremist Groups and Conflict Resolution*. by Hizkias Assefa and Paul Wahrhaftig; *Let It Burn! The Philadelphia Tragedy*. by Michael Boyette and Randi Boyette

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Source: *Transition*, 1991, No. 51 (1991), pp. 150-157

Published by: Indiana University Press on behalf of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2935084>

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PHILADELPHIA FIRE

If John Africa was mad, the police proved every way his equal.

Kathleen Neal Cleaver

It was a stunningly brutal assault. Early in the evening of May 13, 1985, the Philadelphia police dropped a bomb on the roof of a house occupied by MOVE members. The ensuing explosion ignited gasoline stored in a drum on the roof, and the flames spread rapidly to the adjacent row houses. Eventually, as firemen stood in abeyance, two streets were engulfed in flames. The conflagration burned out of control, finally killing eleven MOVE members—five of whom were children—and destroying sixty-one homes, as well as damaging over a hundred others.

What we later came to know as MOVE came into being in the seventies as a group of people who first called themselves the Christian Movement for Life, later shortened to the Movement, from which they derived MOVE. They were a diverse group of seekers drawn to the teachings of the elusive and eccentric character whom they called John Africa. Prior to his incarnation as a spiritual leader, Vincent Leaphart—as he was previously known—

was a barely literate handyman whose dog-walking business had earned him the neighborhood nickname “Dog Man.”

The people who gathered around John Africa and studied his teachings (which were written up by a young white college professor into a book called *The Guidelines*) eventually adopted the surname Africa and considered themselves all one family. Their collective life style included an agreement that they all would exercise vigorously, eat only raw food, eschew electricity and running water, keep their children out of schools, and refrain from killing any living thing—including roaches and rats.

The MOVE family drew in men and women from working-class and middle-class backgrounds, from white and black families, from revolutionary groups like the Black Panthers as well as such mainstream places as law school and the civil service. Somehow, the MOVE family and John Africa provided these people with a sense of purpose and meaning. Their

fanatical adherence to MOVE's teachings made it obvious that more than intellectual agreement with the organizations's tenets was involved in their participation. MOVE became the center of their existence, and John Africa their savior.

The turmoil and upheavals of the late sixties and early seventies stimulated the hunger for justice and revolutionary change that MOVE members felt. Indeed, the teachings of John Africa that had drawn each of them to the organization were a pastiche of themes exalted during the 1960s social revolution, such as non-violence, communal living, racial harmony, self-defense, protection of the environment, physical fitness, and nutritional fads. Above all, MOVE proclaimed that "the system" had to be destroyed because it was too corrupt to be reformed. Unlike MOVE, most of the organizations that had participated in the civil rights and antiwar movements, and their progeny, had espoused but one or two goals.

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MOVE juxtaposed so many goals that the resulting mixture became unstable and essentially contradictory. Its adherence to self-defense, for example, conflicted with its admonition to preserve all living things.

Both these recent books give a condensed version of MOVE's transforma-

tion from a study group following *The Guidelines* to a paramilitary body consumed in the Ossage Avenue inferno. It was the cruelty of the police attack that startled the nation, and compelled so many to try to explain what happened in Philadelphia. These books choose very different approaches, but both shed light on the bizarre events that demonstrated to the world exactly what havoc unbridled police power can cause in a black neighborhood.

Hizkias Assefa and Paul Wahrhaftig's book offers a detailed, rather dry chronicle of the players and events that led to the fiery end of the MOVE crisis. They divide their account into two parts. Part I details the events that led up to the 1978 shootout between the Philadelphia police and MOVE residents of a house in the Powelton Village section. The gun battle erupted in the wake of an eviction attempt that concluded a year-long siege of MOVE's headquarters. During this shoot-out one policeman was killed, and nine MOVE members were eventually convicted of murdering him. These convictions, which MOVE viewed as unjustified, set the tone for their following interactions with the city of Philadelphia. Part II of the book examines the subsequent 1985 confrontation, when the remnants of MOVE and the police were again engaged in a gun battle during an attempt to arrest several individual members. But this time it culminated in the conflagration that destroyed not only MOVE but the entire neighborhood.

Their examination focuses upon the conflict resolution techniques employed during the tortuous unfolding of the crisis.

Discussed in this essay

The MOVE Crisis in Philadelphia: Extremist Groups and Conflict Resolution, Hizkias Assefa and Paul Wahrhaftig, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press

Let It Burn! The Philadelphia Tragedy, Michael Boyette with Randi Boyette, Chicago: Contemporary Books, Inc.

The MOVE confrontation becomes a case study on the utility of such techniques. The case demonstrates such an abysmal failure of conflict resolution that it may seem a peculiar example to focus on: but these authors have their sights on the future. The authors were attracted to this topic, they say, because the challenge that extremist groups pose to conflict resolution is one that is increasingly present in both international and domestic situations. Wahrhaftig, the president of Conflict Resolution Center International in Pittsburgh, originally prepared a report for a conference in Philadelphia following the MOVE tragedy. Unfortunately, his subsequent book retains much of the tone of a report, and perhaps the original purpose inhibited the authors from developing some context that would illuminate what happened between the members of MOVE and the government of Philadelphia. Despite a wealth of detail and frequent quotations from participants, the account fails to yield any coherent understanding of MOVE, the source of the lengthy crisis it wants to dissect under "conflict resolution" lens.

The authors' intent, however, is not to provide an understanding of MOVE but instead to examine the process of conflict resolution in which MOVE was engaged. To their surprise, they discovered that MOVE's encounters with the city of Philadelphia, the courts, the police, and various community organizations shared similar features with international disputes and involved similar techniques of conflict resolution: negotiation, mediation, adjudication, and force.

The authors analyze the benefits and drawbacks of these various conflict resolution techniques employed during the long stages of the evolving MOVE crisis, but the techniques they succeed in analyzing are techniques that ultimately failed. Nor do they sufficiently analyze the causes of the failure. There were fundamental barriers to the peaceful resolution of the confrontation between MOVE and the city of Philadelphia that the authors barely discuss. Certainly MOVE's perception of the institutionalized racism that the courts and police exhibited towards them was one barrier; and, given its legacy of racism, suspicion, and brutality towards black groups, the Philadelphia police department's perception of what constituted an appropriate response to the type of provocation MOVE represented was another. The authors convincingly explain how the seeds of MOVE's final burn-out were planted during the earlier 1978 shootout, the final result of a drawn-out negotiation and siege gone awry. But it remains unclear whether the initial negotiated settlement between MOVE and the police failed because of deficiencies in the way conflict resolution techniques were used, or whether other reasons precipitated the failure.

For example, the authors point to "unresolved feelings of hostility" local policemen felt towards MOVE members as one possible factor in the escalation of violence during the 1985 confrontation. But they describe this hostility as "personal animosity." To limit the analysis of the police response to MOVE to the personal feelings of certain policemen is to fail to appreciate

what their legacy of violence and domination against blacks contributed to the way the police mobilized against MOVE. The authors recognize that the traditional police procedures for dealing with criminals informed their behavior, but do not seem to recognize the equally pervasive role of traditional racist attitudes towards blacks. While the detailed examination of the events preceding the final conflagration include observations about the behavior of MOVE members, various community organizations, intermediaries, and judicial officers, the authors do not examine any police behavior other than their prior interactions with MOVE. And that's a serious omission from any serious analysis of the conflict: the nature of the police interaction with blacks over the years had created a sense of frustration and bitterness among Philadelphia's black community that MOVE both exploited and expanded upon. Given the authors' recognition that the worldview of the parties to a conflict must be understood to appreciate the dynamics of the conflict, their failure to explore police attitudes in any depth is especially damaging to the account.

The conflict resolution movement arose in the aftermath of World War II to provide alternatives to traditional diplomacy and warfare. It has now expanded into a diversified interdisciplinary field that picked up considerable momentum during the seventies, fueled in part by the phenomenal success of the nonviolent movements of the sixties. New domestic applications of conflict resolution techniques have been developed to provide alternatives to the traditional practices of

dispute resolution the courts and police employ. Hundreds of centers now exist where conflict resolution techniques are applied to domestic disputes. And scholars have made this an academically respectable subject—complete with journals, conferences, and even degrees in the field.

Conflict resolution techniques are used successfully when they are substituted for the traditional means of solving disputes that courts or police employ. This never happened in Philadelphia—the police and the courts remained central players in precipitating and prolonging the MOVE crisis, with community negotiators playing peripheral roles that were soon written out of the script. Another conflict-resolution tenet is the need to realize when the stated aims of an extremist group, usually the weaker party to the conflict, actually represent a plea for recognition and respect. Admittedly, MOVE's verbal aggressiveness and hyperbole, and their stated goal of destroying the system, would have required negotiators with a high degree of restraint and imagination, as well as an understanding of the group's underlying need. Needless to say, these qualities were in short supply during both the court proceedings and the police action. One thing is obvious from reading both *The MOVE Crisis* and the journalistic narrative *Let it Burn!*: neither the police nor MOVE placed any faith in the nonviolent conflict resolution process.

Michael and Randi Boyette's account of the MOVE tragedy makes for an exciting and readable story. The couple lived in Philadelphia during both the 1978 siege and shootout as well as during the 1985

burn-out. In fact, Michael Boyette was a member of the grand jury that investigated police conduct following the May 13, 1985 bombing of MOVE's Ossage Avenue home. Not surprisingly, the writing in *Let it Burn!* has a sense of immediacy and involvement that *The MOVE Crisis* lacks, and its narrative presentation flows smoothly without the imposition of a predetermined focus. Boyette's narrative unfolds in a gripping style that makes it hard to put down. The account is well researched, well written, and well intentioned. Despite the authors' carefully gathered and clearly presented facts, however, the hold MOVE had over its adherents—and the motivation behind the group's fanatical behavior—remains essentially a mystery. But they provide enough background for the reader to make a semieducated inference about the basis for the fanaticism.

Following the year-long siege and attempt to starve out MOVE at its Powelton Village residence in 1978, the first gun battle with the Philadelphia police erupted when MOVE failed to adhere to its carefully negotiated agreement to vacate the premises by a certain August date. Unable to find another residence in time, neither MOVE nor the police allowed the process of negotiation to resume. In the ensuing eviction attempt, one policeman was killed. No clear evidence ever linked MOVE to his death, but nonetheless nine MOVE people were convicted of murder. Yet the three policemen accused of beating a MOVE member, for which both videotape and eyewitness accounts existed, were acquitted when the trial judge refused to allow the jury to return a verdict

in the case. This blatant inconsistency and unfairness confirmed MOVE's portrayal of the courts as instruments of oppression. The family's subsequent efforts to win the release of those members it believed to have been unfairly convicted and sentenced to long prison terms were the focal point of its numerous subsequent conflicts with the city.

Boyette's book, of course, gives a far more graphic account of the police attempt to fight madness with madness than do Wahrhaftig and Assefa, but in the end *Let it Burn!* does not condemn the police. The May 13, 1985 assault on Ossage Avenue is described as a bungled, hasty, and frustrated attempt to enter the fortified premises without sacrificing any police or firemen. In that, and only in that, the assault succeeded—no police nor firemen were killed. But the fire that the police started destroyed millions of dollars' worth of property, all but two of the occupants of MOVE's house were burned to death, Mayor Goode's reputation was permanently scarred by the extraordinary police action against a handful of black militants, and numerous families were left homeless for months.

It may have been the case that MOVE's fanatical belief in the corruption of modern society and the need for a revolutionary catharsis militated against any peaceful resolution of its conflicts with the city of Philadelphia. Or it may have been simply that the personality of John Africa was becoming increasingly paranoid and violence-prone as the pressures mounted against the family he headed, and that he adopted insanely confrontational strategies that could only erupt in violence. But

however mad John Africa may have become, Philadelphia's police were equal to the challenge and responded with a madness of their own.

Boyette does not seek to fix blame for the final conflagration. He provides lengthy descriptions of the bungling of the police both in planning and executing the attack on MOVE's Ossage Avenue fortification. Indeed, the detailed presentation of police conduct is such that a reader could wonder whether Boyette wants to exonerate the police—not from the charge of incompetence, but that of malice. He even follows the psychiatric traumas of several police officers, giving sympathetic portrayals of their posttraumatic stress difficulties. The political angle seems to interest him less: he spares no time in establishing that Mayor Goode abdicated his leadership role during the attack. But, finally, Boyette concludes that if the story has a moral, it is that simple explanations

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do not exist. We live in a world, he observes, filled with John Africas—angry voices that advocate violence in the service of Higher Truth.

What neither *Let it Burn!* nor *The MOVE Crisis* examines is *why* our world is filled with John Africas and extremist groups. The authors are far more con-

cerned with how to deal with such advocates in other ways than bringing about their destruction. Clearly, the courts and police in Philadelphia had no such qualms. Their intention to destroy or eliminate the manifestation of John Africa's bizarre, apocalyptic leadership had a sense of full legal and moral justification.

What neither book's authors acknowledge is that a kind of sporadic guerrilla warfare between police forces and poor blacks has been under way for at least the past thirty years. The streams of complaints about police brutality have been but a polite protest against the excessive violence to which urban blacks have been routinely subjected. Philadelphia's police ranked among the most brutal in their blatant terrorism against poor blacks. Years and years of bloodshed fertilized the soil in which numerous protest movements took root, each group's failures giving birth to a more draconian organization whose conviction that violence was the best defense against the police became ever more entrenched.

Nor do the authors understand the perpetual rise and fall of messianic groups within poor urban black communities, which would have helped them place MOVE within its cultural and historical context. Although they are clearly perplexed by the rigid adherence to such a bizarre organization by educated people who could have easily functioned within the mainstream, their failure to understand the religious zeal at the center of MOVE hampers their analyses. "Sierra Club with guns" is the description that Boyette offers. Wahrhaftig and Assefa describe the group as a "radical, activist, countercul-

ture organization.” While some features of MOVE are captured in these terms, terms whose reference is basically to the dominant society, they leave out the core of the movement. Extreme and fanatical religious groups have been a basic part of the social fabric of urban black culture in the twentieth century. Probably the best known and most successful of such groups was the Nation of Islam, colloquially called the Black Muslims. But there have been a host of others with fewer but no less devoted followers, like Father Divine’s Peace Mission Cult during the Depression and later, or the unctuous Daddy Grace’s United House of Prayer. More recently, the devoted members of the People’s Temple (who followed the Reverend Jim Jones to a Guyana jungle retreat and then to mass suicide) displayed the undercurrent of zealous fantasy that permeates black communities and fuels eccentric re-

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ligious movements. Every major black community supports a lesser constellation of spiritualists, healers, and charlatans who all peddle salvation.

In the wake of intense periods of social unrest and transformation, when old traditions have lost their authority but no

new consensus has been reached, many people sense that their world has fallen apart. Some of these people seek out certainty in tight, cult-like groups that provide them answers to fundamental questions, give them a new identity, and infuse their lives with a mission. For some, this process is sufficient to dislodge their personal crises, or cure them of addictions or other debilities. John Africa, the adopted name of MOVE’s prophet-like leader, was able to do this for his followers. He gave them a family to belong to, a place to live, an idealistic mission to accomplish, and a practical sense of commitment to the heavily promoted goal of destroying “the system.” The rise of black nationalism during the sixties and seventies influenced the group, and its adoption of the family name “Africa” incorporated the continent’s mythical power into their eclectic beliefs. Unless the needs that MOVE met for its adherents are recognized, their fanatical devotion to John Africa will seem bizarre and irrational.

In particular, since the demise of the Black Panther party during the seventies, few black groups have openly flaunted their intent to protect themselves from police aggression. Yet, for the MOVE family, a significant part of the cult’s appeal, and proof of its genuineness, was its determination to defend itself. The adults in MOVE had bought into the glorification of violence that suffused our society during the Vietnam war era. They were survivors and observers of the war psychosis that Vietnam brought to a boil in black ghettoes already seething with drug abuse, crime, and family deterioration. At the

same time, the police in their neighborhoods were recipients of the transfer of military tactics from Vietnam into domestic police actions. These men in uniform, above all, brought the war home.

The handful of people clustered into the MOVE collective were, in many ways, obnoxious and absurd, and their life style was, to say the least, eccentric. Yet eccentricity, peculiar religious views, and minor violations of the law rarely provoke a response as barbaric as the Philadelphia police visited upon MOVE. To comprehend such unrestrained hostility, deeper causes must be sought. But start with the most obvious fact: MOVE was a black group, a black group that repudiated the dominant society and intended to secure its authority and autonomy with revolutionary violence. That is why the police treated them the way they did. Any black group that lasts long enough to engage the police has faced a similar response. The seventies were replete with virulent attacks against black revolutionary groups, black prisoners, and black individuals whose actual power to harm the system was negligible, but whose power to provoke the police to extraordinary violence was phenomenal.

The real question that the MOVE tragedy poses, neither book ever asks: Why did the police department behave so savagely? The authors of both books succumb to the mind-set that Malcolm X succinctly described when he said that the American system blamed blacks for their oppression, making the victims look like criminals and the criminals look like victims.

The true victims in this story were MOVE's black neighbors. They were victims of MOVE's excesses as well as victims of the police pathology. In both MOVE confrontations, the one in Powelton Village and the one at Ossage Avenue, the neighbors, despite years of attempts and petitions, were never able to get the police to respond to their complaints against MOVE. The police never served these people—was it because the police assumed that, as blacks, they did not deserve adequate protection? When the police finally acted, they not only destroyed MOVE, they destroyed the neighborhood as well—a neighborhood filled with black families. This is the extraordinary abuse of police power that cries out for explanation, but neither of these books even poses the question.