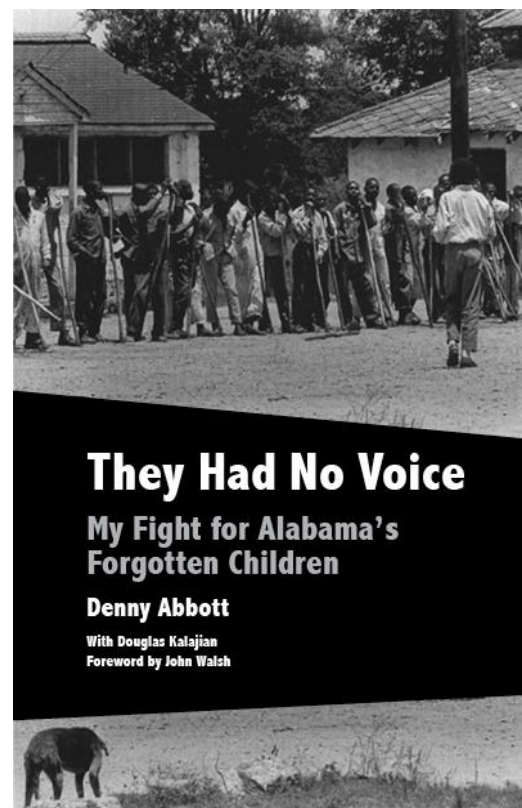
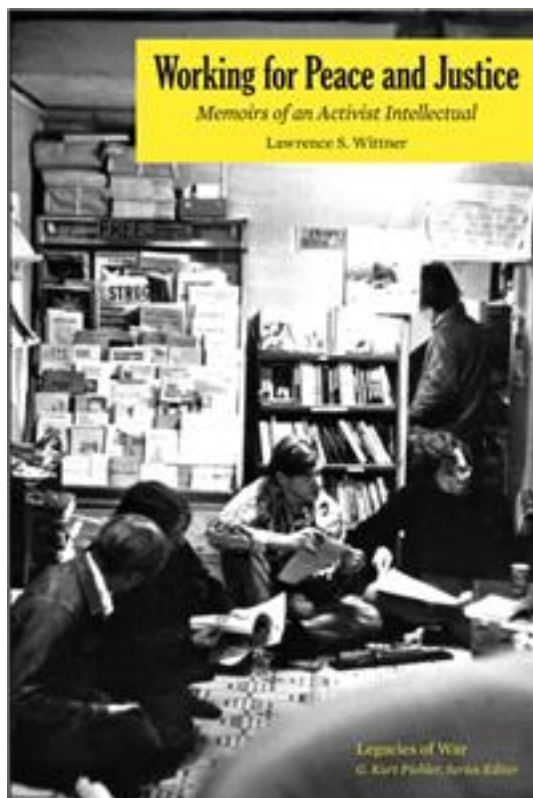


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review Essay: *They Had No Voice* by Denny Abbott  
and *Working for Peace and Justice* by Lawrence S.  
Wittner

By Jyl Lynn Felman



***Working For Peace and Justice: Memoirs of an Activist Intellectual* by Lawrence S. Wittner (University of Tennessee Press, 2012)**

***They Had No Voice: My Fight for Alabama's Forgotten Children* by Denny Abbott (New South Books, 2013).**

What does it take to be a life-long activist? How does it happen that a person takes on a political cause? Or does the cause take on the person? When does the political become personal enough to take action, risk harm to your family, lose all job security, and open yourself to public attack for years?

I kept asking myself these questions while reading the memoirs *Working for Peace and Justice* by Lawrence S. Wittner and *They Had No Voice* by Denny Abbott. Although their lives differ in terms of class, privilege, and higher education, both men committed themselves to political activism. While they both came to radical politics in their twenties, their paths to activism, beginning in the 1960's, were motivated by vastly different experiences and expectations.

Lawrence Wittner grew up in a middle-class, intellectual, and cultured family in Brooklyn and developed a social conscience when he was young. After finishing his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, he became an academic activist (continuing even into his seventies) with his first teaching job at the Hampton Institute, a historically black university in Hampton, Virginia. Wittner was one of the few white professors. He was immediately drawn into the 1960's struggle for civil rights and challenged the passivity of the older black faculty and administration whose goal was to assimilate into the "white" world and not make trouble. Eventually, Wittner lost his job for challenging the dominant ideology of Hampton Institute and firing up his African American students. Years later, after writing the first two of three volumes of *The Struggle Against the Bomb*, he became a world expert on the history of the peace and nuclear disarmament movement.

Denny Abbott grew up working class in Montgomery, Alabama with a violent and racist father who secretly may have been in the Ku Klux Klan. Abbott married his high school sweetheart at the end of their senior year. In the 1960's, right after college, he worked as a probation officer at the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children at Mt. Meigs. His job was to transfer young black children to what he calls "a slave camp" (xiii) on the outskirts of Montgomery.

Typical of the time, Alabama had separate accommodations for black and white juvenile delinquents. Observing the conditions the black children were forced to live in --daily beatings, severely cramped living conditions, starvation, and filthy mold-infected bathrooms -- Abbott started complaining and filing reports. In the beginning he

was rewarded for his efforts to "clean up" the detention center and stop the child abuse.

At twenty-three, due to exemplary recommendations, Abbott was promoted to chief probation officer, the youngest in Alabama history. And that's when the trouble really began. According to Abbott, "Mine was the last generation of white privilege and dominance and the first with a real opportunity to change and even help it along. It was an opportunity most of the white people I grew up with didn't exactly embrace" (xxiv). When little changed, Abbott ended up suing the State of Alabama in federal court for its mistreatment of the black youth in its care. After eleven years he was forced out of his job in the probation system and had to leave the state.

He was out of work for nine months, cleaning bathrooms part-time until he was asked to run a regional youth detention center in West Palm Beach. He grabbed the chance and uprooted his family. Once settled in Florida, Abbott realized the conditions of the West Palm Beach youth detention facility were similar to those in Montgomery. He complained and was forced out of his job again. Later he became the national director of the Adam Walsh Child Resource Center and created the first computerized data bank of missing children, testifying before Congress and state legislatures.

Unlike Wittner, who wanted to get away from Brooklyn and experience the world, Abbott had never planned to leave Montgomery, which to him was a great place to grow up. He became a reluctant and unwitting activist. And in contrast to Wittner, Abbott had no supportive coworkers and no "connections." From his undergraduate and graduate days, Wittner always had sympathetic and helpful colleagues. Although both suffered severe social ostracism for many years, Wittner's privilege served him well. Always "connected" to someone higher up on the academic ladder, Wittner (unlike Abbott) was able to draw on his long list of supportive colleagues around the country for continued teaching positions and research funding.

The scope of Wittner's activism is astounding. From civil rights activism to labor organizing, from fighting against the Viet Nam war to the front lines of peace activism, he never stopped. One of the most powerful stories is his fight for secure employment as a professor. He was repeatedly fired from one academic job to another. After Hampton, he was an assistant professor at Vassar, lost his job there due to political activism, and was "demoted" to an instructor position at the State University of New York, Albany. Like Abbott, he spent years living with the threat and often the reality of financial insecurity.

After a long, protracted fight among faculty over Wittner's radical leftist politics -- his scholarship was never challenged -- he ended up a full professor at the State University of New York, Albany, and author of seven books (and editor of four), and countless scholarly articles. What's remarkable about Wittner is that he was not just an academic activist through his writing and teaching. At the same time, he was also "out in the streets," going to demonstrations, speaking to the media and getting

arrested. He became an internationalist, traveling around the world giving lectures on the need for disarmament.

Because Wittner was involved in every major political battle from the 1960's to the present, it is surprising and disappointing that he doesn't mention the Women's Movement, and the impact that Second Wave Feminism had on his peace activism and personal life. Although he mentions briefly being part of a men's group, he writes that they had nothing "really" to talk about, so they socialized instead. Discussing masculinity and gender issues did not seem to engage the participants. So the group disbanded soon after it started. Although Wittner could imagine a world without nuclear arms, he didn't imagine or care deeply about male dominance and its impact on the global peace movement or his role in perpetuating male privilege personally. The question is: why didn't Wittner incorporate feminist theory into his political work? Unfortunately, he didn't have to. His life didn't depend on the disruption of gender roles and fighting the tight grip of patriarchy.

***Pedagogically speaking, both memoirs are excellent teaching tools, although for different reasons.***

Central to both men's memoirs is the role that their wives, Patty Wittner and Sharon Abbott, played in their careers. Patty was often angry, because she wanted Wittner to give up his political work and "just" be a professor. An ambivalent supporter of her husband's work, she stayed with him throughout the numerous times he was forced to relocate the family from state to state in search of employment, including outside the United States. At one point, Patty and Julia, their young daughter, had to move to Japan so Wittner could teach. Later they lived all over the world, including Africa.

Sharon Abbott was totally supportive of her husband's work, and encouraged him to make a moral, public stand about the horrible conditions at the state youth detention center -- even at great social cost to herself and their children, who were bullied at school. Ironically, neither man discusses the political impact or implications of his wife's support or mentions feminism. For Abbott, the omission of feminism from his memoir is more understandable, as he was a "single" issue activist. The fact that Wittner never mentions feminism is more disturbing because he was a historian with a long activist history in all the most pressing issues of the time. The truth is, neither activist could have succeeded without the total support of his wife. Years after Wittner and Abbott became national figures, both divorced and remarried. To Wittner's credit, he does discuss the fragility of his marriage and the many painful fights he had with Patty throughout his activist career. He wanted to divorce her long before Patty was ready.

These books are political autobiographies more than literary memoirs. For each author the goal is to "tell" the story chronologically, in linear narration, rather than to

engage in creative storytelling technique or in-depth psychological reflection. And in this both succeed well. Although the range of the stories differs in content and style, Wittner's is more erudite compared with Abbott's simple, strong prose. At the same time, I wish there had been more deep personal reflection in both texts. While Wittner's story is about a lifetime of activism, Abbott's story is centered almost entirely around his legal fight with the State of Alabama. Wittner does ruminate deeply on his life-long friendship with Michael, his freshman college roommate at Columbia University, but he doesn't offer great insight into his feelings about male bonding except to say Michael was like the brother he never had. He does discuss the emotional toll his activism took, however: one of the most moving sections of Wittner's book chronicles his long battle for tenure and the petty narcissism of the academy that cost him so much wherever he taught.

Pedagogically speaking, both memoirs are excellent teaching tools, although for different reasons. Abbott's *They Had No Voice* exemplifies the difference a single person can make in committing him/herself to a specific cause, child advocacy in Abbott's case. Students in introductory political science, sociology, or American Studies courses would benefit a great deal from reading this book. It is an effective text to generate group discussion and lends itself to personal reflection and writing. It's perfect also for high school juniors or seniors and reminds me of Mab Segrest's *Reflections of A Race Traitor*. Segrest's memoir is about her personal fight against the Klan and exposing her family's racist ideas. Born in 1949 in the South and a life-long radical feminist activist, she confronts her bigoted relatives and coins the political theory of queer socialism. Students rave about this text.

Wittner's *Working for Peace and Justice* covers a personal commitment to all the significant historical movements, except feminism, from the 1960's to the present, which makes it an excellent text for understanding the development of the radical left in US politics. It zeroes in on civil rights, labor struggles, and the Viet Nam war, in addition to his disarmament work. For undergraduates this is a terrific text, because the author himself offers a macro view of activism and has written so much on the specific issues in other articles or books that further reading is invited.

The inspiration that both books engender is electrifying. It is hard to believe that Wittner didn't collapse from sheer physical exhaustion from his total commitment to a life of activism. Repeatedly his narrative made me ask myself, *what have I done or could do that would make a difference?* Abbott's memoir is visionary because he never wanted or planned to take on a cause or get involved in political issues. The issue of child advocacy came to him and propelled him to action. In the end, reading these texts together is a great way to understand the different ways the personal becomes political.



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