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In New York, Fringe Politics in Mainstream

By MICHAEL SLACKMAN

More than a decade ago, when Fred Newman and Lenora Fulani embraced Marxist ideology, they could not persuade even the Rev. Al Sharpton to run under the banner of their fringe political party in his 1992 Senate bid.

Mr. Sharpton, seeking to gain legitimacy as a candidate, began distancing himself from the two and from their New Alliance Party, as questions about his past association with them threatened to undermine his campaign and his credibility.

But in recent years, Dr. Fulani and Dr. Newman have found many of the state's top political leaders eager to court their latest organization, the Independence Party of New York.



The Rev. Al Sharpton at a 1990 rally with Lenora Fulani, center, and Fred Newman, right, two influential members of the Independence Party.

Through the party, Dr. Fulani and Dr. Newman, who were once considered eccentric figures on the political fringe, have found new stature, to the point where Republicans like Gov. George E. Pataki to Democrats like Attorney General Eliot Spitzer and United States Senator Charles E. Schumer have courted their party's support. Today, the Inde-

pendence Party is expected to endorse the re-election bid of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, a Republican.

The rise of Dr. Newman and Dr. Fulani from outsider status - with organizations that were as interested in psychotherapy and Marxist ideology as in electoral politics - has been part of a strategy that has resulted in their dominance over the Independence Party. The party has emerged as a powerful vote-getter in many state and local races, knocking the Conservative Party off the third line on the ballot and giving Mr. Bloomberg his margin of victory in 2001.

In recent years, Dr. Newman, a psychotherapist, and Dr. Fulani, who ran two quixotic campaigns for the White House, have, according to the party's state chairman, become the dominant force in the Independence Party's New York City branch, and have a significant influence on the direction of the state party.

For politicians like Mr. Bloomberg, the Independence Party's backing is an invaluable asset in a city where the vast majority of voters are registered Democrats. It will give voters the option of casting their ballots for the mayor on the Independence line instead of the Republican line. But the party's support has come at some cost, with Mr. Bloomberg recently having to distance himself from Dr. Fulani after she refused to disavow remarks she wrote in 1989 in which she said Jews "had to sell their souls to acquire Israel and are required to do the dirtiest work of capitalism" and had to "function as mass murderers of people of color" to keep it.

"With Lenora Fulani, I don't agree with her despicable comments," Mr. Bloomberg said in a meeting with The

New York Times. "I've said so, other people have said so. But you know, you walk away from every party where one person in it said something that you violently disagree with, you wouldn't be a member of the Democratic Party, you wouldn't be a member of the Republican Party, you wouldn't be a member of any party."

Dr. Fulani's comments and the group's widening ties to the state's leading politicians have caused former Independence Party leaders and former followers of Dr. Newman to resurrect accusations that he uses his psychotherapy centers as recruiting tools for his political activities. And they charge that the reverse is also true: People who enter his world through his political activities are channeled into his therapeutic practice.

"Fred Newman's organizations are nothing if not intertwined," Jeremiah Duboff said in an e-mail message, adding that he worked with Dr. Newman and his organizations from 1990 to 1997.

There is no suggestion that Dr. Newman and his followers influence Mr. Bloomberg's governance of the city. As is often the case in politics, the alliance between the mayor, a self-made billionaire, and Dr. Newman appears to be one of political convenience. Officials like Mr. Bloomberg either choose to ignore or do not know of other activities - past and present - of some of the party's leaders, while Dr. Newman and his followers win credibility and validation for all of their work, both inside and outside government.

But Dr. Newman and his followers have accrued benefits since the Bloomberg administration took over. Mr. Bloomberg has contributed \$250,000 to the Independence Party; he appointed a

lawyer who often works with organizations affiliated with Dr. Newman to a mayoral commission charged with revising the city charter. And city economic development officials granted \$8.7 million in low-interest financing to a non-profit group tied to Dr. Newman so that it could buy a Manhattan building that it then used to run several programs designed by Dr. Newman.

Perhaps more important, though, is the credibility that Dr. Newman's other organizations gain through their association with the mayor. In offices of several organizations affiliated with Dr. Newman, there are pictures of Mr. Pataki and Mr. Bloomberg on the wall. When his one of organizations, the All Stars Project, has held galas, Mr. Schumer and other officials have attended.

Equally important is how the mayor and other politicians have helped reinforce the idea that the Independence Party represents independent voters, or unaligned.

"What is fair is that the Independence Party is growing stronger, and I think there is a reason for that," the mayor said at a speech to Independence Party members. "Independents are the fastest-growing group of voters in America."



Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, a Republican, with Lenora Fulani last year. Dr. Fulani's organization, the Independence Party of New York, is expected to endorse Mr. Bloomberg's re-election bid today.

That kind of mainstream acceptance has been achieved incrementally over the years. As Dr. Newman and Dr. Fulani have gradually built their political power, Dr. Newman and his colleagues have built a multimillion-dollar enterprise that involves counseling centers around the country and, among other things, a thea-

ter that produces his plays in Times Square.

Such stature is a sharp departure from the past, but Dr. Newman says he still adheres to many of his original beliefs and principles. In the 1970's, he created something called the International Workers Party, which was identified as a Leninist-Marxist organization. Dr. Newman said that the party has been transformed into a "core collective" that is made up of people working in his political, psychological and theatrical ventures, and that helps set the agenda for most of his projects. He said members of the collective then team up with other people - often unaffiliated with any of his organizations - to carry out their plans.

"So there is this grouping of people who I have organized who have been with me for a very, very long time, and organized around the philosophical perspective that I put forth on this issue of enfranchisement and alienation," Dr. Newman said. "I have written extensively about alienation. It is of great concern to me."

Politics and Psychotherapy

Dr. Newman, 69, began organizing in the 1960's, a time when young people challenged not only the Vietnam War and the United States government but also concepts of society, family relations and mental health. With a doctorate in philosophy from Stanford University, Dr. Newman fit in with the spirit of the time, challenging many conventional beliefs as he began a career that focused his revolutionary zeal on psychological practices and political organizing.

"I got to know Fred, and he said he wanted to politicize his psychotherapy practice and start a collective of liberation front," said James Retherford, who split with Dr. Newman.

Dr. Newman's early work drew from his theories of social therapy, a practice that employed the language of the left - patients were called revolutionaries - and a vision of healing emotional problems by changing patients' relationships to their environment, at least in part through political activism. Some on the left criti-

cized Dr. Newman, saying that he used talk of revolution to seduce young people into his organizations, though Dr. Newman says that the traditional left disliked his work because it presented a threat.

In the 1970's, Dr. Newman and about 40 of his followers joined forces with Lyndon LaRouche, the perennial fringe presidential candidate. The marriage did not last, and Dr. Newman subsequently created the International Workers Party.

In some of his works, Dr. Newman's call for political empowerment is seamlessly intertwined with his ideas about psychotherapy. In his 1986 speech in Havana, Dr. Newman described his approach as "Marxist therapy," adding "that human beings are capable of radically reorganizing social structure."

Dr. Newman's social therapy has been criticized - and praised - for taking an unconventional approach, for focusing on group therapy and for blurring the boundaries between patients and therapists.

"The social therapy group has been called a cult," said Rick Ross, who has extensively studied cults. "It is a personality driven group, call it what you will, a philosophical sect, the Fred Newman fan club. It centers around, and is driven by, Fred Newman."

In the late 1970's, Dr. Newman disbanded the International Workers Party, but its leaders remained behind the scenes, as they do now, helping to create and direct the work of other organizations, like the New Alliance Party, according to former members of the party, and the cadre.

Part of the strategy, a former member said, was to create organizations that would bring followers and credibility to their political agenda. One plan, for example, involved helping to promote Mr. Sharpton. When Mr. Sharpton was at a low point in his career as a public leader, Dr. Newman and his followers helped him build a following as he led marches through the streets of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, to protest the racial killing of a black teenager.

Organizations affiliated with Dr. Newman gave Mr. Sharpton an office, organized busloads of volunteers for his protest marches and helped him earn an

income, according to people involved in those activities. But then Mr. Sharpton balked at running for office as a member of the New Alliance Party and instead joined the Democrats.

Each step of the way, Dr. Newman and his followers refined their tactics, changing their language to reflect the times, aligning themselves with candidates as diverse as Ralph Nader and Patrick J. Buchanan.

"One of the things I learned in the course of this work, people can move - can grow - when people vote for candidates they aren't just voting for individuals, they are voting to empower political parties and machines," Dr. Fulani said in an interview.

Michael Hardy, a lawyer who went to work for Mr. Sharpton after leaving the New Alliance Party in 1992, said that all of the organizations were created to serve as the more acceptable public faces for a group that was controlled by Dr. Newman.

"The New Alliance Party, Social Therapy, were all mechanisms by which the International Workers Party operated publicly," Mr. Hardy said.

A Growing Voice

In 1994, a group of upstate New Yorkers moved to create a third party. Faced with the challenge of collecting thousands of signatures to place a candidate on the ballot, the group's early leaders reached out to Dr. Newman and Dr. Fulani, because their followers had been successful in organizing such operations, former and present party members said. The party's candidate for governor, the upstate businessman Tom Golisano, spent millions of his own money on the campaign, and his strong showing earned the party a guaranteed line on the ballot in elections around the state.

Over time, Dr. Newman's longtime colleagues - including members of his

"core collective" - helped organize a revolt against the leaders of the party. The forces in line with Dr. Fulani and Dr. Newman eventually triumphed with a reorganization that gave the New York City branch of the Independence Party - which they had the most control of - autonomy from the state organization and the ability to decide who received the ballot line in city elections.

Frank MacKay, the state chairman, said in an interview that the reorganization meant that Dr. Newman and his followers effectively controlled the city organization, and he said they were hugely influential in running the state party.

With its control of a crucial ballot line in New York City, the party teamed up with Mr. Bloomberg in 2001. The two agreed on one main issue: promoting nonpartisan elections, which would ultimately weaken the Democrats' dominance of New York City - and empower a party that identified as independent.

Cathy Stewart, one of the leaders of the Independence Party in Manhattan and around the state and a longtime colleague of Dr. Newman, helped coordinate Mr. Bloomberg's petition drive to get on the ballot, and many of the people who had helped run some of Dr. Newman's other organizations also helped circulate petitions, records show.

"The Independence Party isn't a usual kind of party," Ms. Stewart said. "That is because of the fight that we waged and won at the grassroots for local control."

Pulled Into Politics

But some former members of organizations affiliated with Dr. Newman say that one of the ways the Independence Party finds volunteers and draws support for its agenda - including the mayor - is through Dr. Newman's nonpolitical groups.

Erika Van Meir, of Atlanta, said she was training with Dr. Newman to be-

come a social therapist when she found herself being pulled into his world. During her training, she said, "I couldn't understand why they were talking about Bloomberg so much," adding in an e-mail message that she "found it odd that one patient returned from a trip to New York talking about how they met up with Fulani and a bunch of her associates who were trying to get Bloomberg elected."

Dr. Newman and some of his present colleagues say that no one involved in any one of his groups is under any pressure to be involved in any of his other activities.

In recent years, the All Stars Project has become more visible in the city, in part through its work with schoolchildren. The group's program helps introduce children to Dr. Newman's ideas and some of the practices he uses in social therapy.

Many elected officials and high-profile artists, academics and businesspeople have lent their names and credibility to the organization because of its work with poor minority children, with whom they put on talent shows. But the All Stars Project also runs a theater project for adults, which often produces plays written by Dr. Newman.

At the same time, the All Stars Project has made grants to Dr. Newman's psychological institute to help pay for programs that seek to spread his ideas about social therapy and political engagement. Dr. Newman disputes the suggestion that he has designed his organizations to funnel people from one activity to the other. He also says that his work is about empowering people. "I think we have accomplished a little something, not very big," he said. "We have managed to reach the disenfranchised."