BOOK REVIEWS


Attempting to understand what gives social movements their “palpable energy, excitement, and sense of possibility,” (p. 170) UCLA (The University of California, Los Angeles) anthropologist Karen Brodkin finds the answer in the birth of individual and collective identity among a cohort of young community activists who came of age during the 1990s in Los Angeles. These youth, most Latino or Asian immigrants or the sons or daughters of immigrants, underwent personal transformations that led them to understand their social and political identities in ways that fell outside the boundaries of mainstream ideology. While engaged in mutually supportive activist networks linking new-generation unions and immigrant rights organizations, they forged a collective narrative in which particular racial, ethnic, or class grievances became the basis for working-class solidarity and shared opposition to global capitalism. The resulting mindset, Brodkin believes, is leading these youth to articulate new democratic ideals, both in public disputes and in the demands they make on their own organizations.

Brodkin, recognized as one of the founders of feminist anthropology, draws her data from life history narratives constructed from interviews with 16 young adults, many of whom she knew as students at UCLA or through her own activist work in the Los Angeles area. Written on the eve of her retirement, her book celebrates the struggles of these youth to find a social and political home, to discover kindred spirits, to develop an oppositional political consciousness, and to become effective political agents. The world she describes has little to do with the rock star politics that drew many youth to the Obama campaign; it more closely resembles the activist youth culture chronicled by Richard Flacks in Youth and Social Change and Kenneth Keniston in Young Radicals during the Vietnam War opposition and civil rights movement era in the United States.

The book is most persuasive when it stays close to the stories told by the young activists. One of the most insightful sections describes how the young activists’ histories challenge three prevailing narratives of the immigrant experience (see especially pp. 56–60). Countering the stereotype of a gap between parents who won’t assimilate and youth who do, the stories reveal youth and parents who share activist leanings rooted in complementary struggles to find a social and political identity in their new home. Countering the view that immigrant cultures subordinate women, these youth find much to value and emulate in the male and female role models in their lives. Finally, countering the Horatio Alger myth, the stories reveal youth raised in a social world where “reciprocity and responsibility to others was paramount” (p. 59).

Brodkin is sometimes too eager to draw broad conclusions from her limited
sample, and builds her case with little pause to consider counterarguments or dissonances within the data. By putting youth at center stage, she risks slighting the roles played by older activists. As a contribution to our understanding of social movements, the book’s strength is its emphasis on ideological factors and motivations, but it is less helpful at analyzing how these relate to other factors, such as the nature of movement organizations and the political strategies and tactics they employ.

If global capitalism is the common enemy, we will wait a long time for the radical social change which Brodkin champions. It is fine to celebrate the “explosive energy” (p. 181) brought by young adult activists, but the real challenge is to find forms of movement organization that can be sustained over the long haul. Brodkin touches on this concern in noting how these activists push for changes within their organizations that might protect them from burnout. But in general, this part of the analysis is content with a rather vague hope that the vision animating today’s short-lived movement will carry forward into future struggles and movements. I do not doubt that this articulation makes sense as Brodkin examines her own life experience, which bridges 1960s activism and more recent struggles, but it seems too thin a hope on which to build an effective and sustained oppositional politics.

Readers of this journal will find Brodkin’s work particularly useful in two respects. First, her use of life history narratives is a methodology with great promise within the field of community development, particularly when a cohort of interesting subjects is identifiable and available. Second, the stories of these immigrant youth are instructive quite apart from the particular political slant with which Brodkin frames them. Particularly as presented in chapter 3, “Political Identity Starts at Home: Border-Crossing Families and the Making of Political Selves,” the accounts reveal a great deal about changing patterns of racial and ethnic identification and their consequences for understanding the political aspirations of today’s youth. One eagerly awaits a version of this story that draws on the voices of immigrant youth in settings other than the special case of Los Angeles, but written with the same sense of passion and commitment evidenced by Brodkin and her young narrators.

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This book introduces readers to the networked nonprofit, then goes into detail on tangible actions for becoming more networked. The book includes topics, such as how to understand social networks; how to create a social culture; listening, engaging, and building relationships; building trust through transparency; working with crowds; understanding learning loops; and governing through networks. It also builds on one of the six practices of high-impact nonprofits noted by Crutchfield and McLeod Grant (2008) of “nurturing nonprofit networks.” The book ends with a glossary of terms as well as a fairly thorough resource list of literature cited for each chapter.

I recently met with an experienced Executive Director, and learned the power of a networked nonprofit. We had both attended a keynote talk by