Full text

Review of Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism (Tamar W. Carroll, 2015), by Lana Dee Povitz. (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2016).

Tamar W. Carroll. *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 304 pp. Paper, $34.95, ISBN: 978-1-4696-1988-0)

Reviewed by Lana Dee Povitz, New York University

Tamar Carroll has produced that dazzling rarity of a book--one that engages the activist as much as the historian. With insights that are in turn sobering and hopeful, *Mobilizing New York* points to the importance of political economy in shaping what organizations can achieve and to the positive role of difference in the creation of vibrant social movements. It focuses on three major sites of urban activism--anti-poverty, feminist, and AIDS-related organizing--and uses them as case studies to examine the fate of participatory democracy from the 1960s through the early 1990s in New York City.

The first section focuses on Mobilization for Youth (MFY) and its conversion from a Cold War-era product of top-down technocratic liberalism into a grassroots-directed movement for social citizenship. Initially intended, in Carroll's analysis, to combat delinquency, drug use, and gang violence in the predominantly African-American and Puerto Rican Lower East Side, MFY instead came to serve low-income families on their own terms (25). The community members who approached MFY staff after it opened its doors in 1962 were overwhelmingly mothers. They wanted to talk, not about delinquency but about abysmal housing, bad schools, and a recalcitrant, prejudiced welfare bureaucracy. To an extent difficult to imagine in the twenty-first century, the program proved flexible. The staff listened. The MFY hired paraprofessionals, neighborhood residents who lacked formal education but whose knowledge of the community was unparalleled. In pioneering new models for client advocacy, in facilitating sit-ins, rent strikes, and street demonstrations, the program became a decisive force in the welfare rights movement--far from its creators' original goal.

Part of Carroll's intervention is to accord greater recognition to "the troops"--mothers and paraprofessionals--and therefore to de-emphasize the role of "elite, activist" social scientists that historians such as Noel Cazenave have credited with reshaping the democratic process during the early War on Poverty (24). In highlighting the agency of low-income women of color, Carroll adds her voice to a powerful chorus of feminist historians who have made similar arguments in recent years: Sonia Song-Ha Lee, Annelise Orleck, the late Adina Back, Rhonda Williams, Premilla Nadasen, and Nancy Naples, among others.[1] As long as poor women of color remain marginalized from the decision-making structures that govern their lives, these stories need to be told. But, as Carroll makes clear, it was a confluence of factors that enabled the troops to set the agenda.

First, there was the ideology of those who already had a measure of power: the social workers, most of them young and idealistic, from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, tended to have prior experience in labor unions, civil rights organizing, and anti-war activism. They were committed to the principle of maximum feasible participation, or the idea that poor people should be as involved as possible in their own problem solving. This made them amenable to changing their minds about what they should be doing when confronted with new information about the needs of neighborhood residents. Moreover, as they worked to help families navigate an intransigent welfare system, the shared experience of frustration had a radicalizing effect and deepened their commitment. Carroll concludes her section on MFY with a wistful curtain of quotations from participants whose lives were changed by their involvement, such as Marilyn Bibb Gore's proclamation: "I wouldn't have missed that experience for anything in life" (77). MFY was powered by a shared affinity between people of different class and race backgrounds.

Second, and crucially, the political economy was supportive during the 1960s in a way it has not been since. MFY was underwritten by a combination of federal money and grants from the Ford Foundation. Even though this support was scaled back later in the decade, thanks in no small part to redbaiting and false charges of financial mismanagement, it meant that MFY had resources. This enabled MFY staff to do everything from helping people to find legal representation, to providing spaces to hold meetings, to offering publicity and training for direct actions, to subsidizing Black artists to mentor students in the nascent Black Arts movement. MFY could pay its workers to "help people learn to fight" (50), to take on the extremely labor-intensive, time-consuming work of facilitating collective decision-making. With federal resources, MFY could successfully channel frustrations over terrible living conditions away from inter-ethnic rivalry toward those truly responsible: local landlords and city government. As one social worker pointed out, "without the federal government mandating community participation, none of this could have happened in the way it did" (78).

Carroll's middle section on the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) and its progenitors continues these themes: the productive role of difference, the importance of federal funding in expanding or curtailing the participation of poor people, and the profound effects of social movement participation on individual lives. Founded in 1974 by Jan Peterson, the NCNW was based in Williamsburg-Greenpoint, Brooklyn. It brought together working-class African Americans, Polish Americans, Italian Americans, and Puerto Ricans to address shared concerns stemming from de-industrialization and declining municipal tax revenues. Its many accomplishments included establishing a day care, a senior citizen center, and tuition-free college courses on women's health, urban sociology, labor, and immigration. By 1976, 300 to 400 women were regularly participating in NCNW programs. Peterson harnessed federal funding through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) to start Project Open Doors, which employed 200 women in feminist nonprofits across the city. Consciousness-raising was crucial, as were the NCNW's built-in mechanisms to address inequality among members and enhance their sense of individual and collective agency.

Peterson, a Wisconsin-born social worker of working-class descent, is a pivotal character. We learn that in 1964, Peterson boarded a bus for New York in search of the civil rights movement, that she worked for MFY during the 1960s, and that she was challenged by her partner Marshall England of Harlem Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to organize

other white people (a fascinating but unexplored detail from the book's introduction). Peterson was also galvanized by her time in the women's movement, where she helped organize speak-outs on abortion and rape and participated in consciousness-raising groups. After struggling to maintain NCNW's goals of participatory democracy and empowerment of low-income women while at the same time navigating the increasing strictures of funding agencies (especially after the 1982 the loss of CETA funding, which underwrote much of New York City's feminist social service provision during the 1970s), Peterson ultimately shifted gears, focusing on collaboration with international grassroots women's groups. While the reader comes to see Peterson as a catalyzing and sustaining force, she remains an under-theorized presence. Are we meant to understand her as unique or representative? Was her leadership ever contested? What does it tell us about the development of working-class feminist groups more broadly?

In this section, Carroll presents a movement of white ethnics that was progressive rather than reactionary. The mostly white women of the NCNW resisted the patriarchal assumption of female submissiveness without rejecting their roles as wives and mothers, and built partnerships with African-American and Latina activists around shared local concerns. Their principled coalition work did not strive for agreement, so, to a remarkable degree, it was able to sustain differences of opinion about issues such as abortion or the Equal Rights Amendment while furthering the idea that women's choices should not be limited by economic status. Because of the group's careful attention to process, identity politics were not antagonistic to but complementary with community organizing, with members learning to accept each other without whitewashing inequalities of power. This important intervention goes far to discredit the assumption that "identity politics" (a focus on particular aspects of one's identity, such as class and/or gender) are divisive. While ethnic, racial, and class differences among NCNW women may have been respected, tolerated, and worked through, sexual difference seems to have been more of a taboo. References to homosexuality within the NCNW are sparse, and lesbian voices are markedly absent in this section's interviews. What does this suggest about working-class lesbian feminist sexuality?

Happily, lesbians (albeit mostly middle-class lesbians) are well represented in Carroll's final section on the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and Women's Health Action Mobilization (WHAM!). Founded in 1987 and 1989 respectively, these two organizations often worked together, understanding that AIDS and abortion rights activists were jointly "hounded by the moral specter of sex guilt," and shared a common enemy: the religious right (136). Challenging the notion of feminism being on the wane during the 1980s and 1990s, Carroll's rich descriptions of gays, lesbians, and heterosexual women making common cause presents us with a rare instance of men acknowledging the skills and power of women, many of whom had years of prior organizing experience in women's liberation movements. ACT UP in particular was extremely effective; they were responsible not only for changing the national consciousness around AIDS, but also for more concrete victories, such as expanding the Center for Disease Control's definition to include opportunistic infections common to women and lowering the price of AIDS medication.

This final section has much teach readers who are trying to organize in the present moment. Unlike MFY and NCNW, which had their heydays during a time of federal if not also city government support, ACT UP and WHAM! members faced antagonistic government and the socio-economic fallout of austerity measures. Neither organization had paid staff or a formalized hierarchy; decisions were reached by majority vote. ACT UP pursued a highly effective inside/outside strategy, with some members engaging as experts with government and the pharmaceutical industry, and others disrupting business as usual through demonstrations, zap actions, graffiti and wheat pasting. By using an affinity group structure, decisions did not require consensus, allowing people to focus on what was most important to them. This was another way to use difference (of identity, priority, experience, and style) to the group's advantage.

Meetings existed to inform and organize members--but also, crucially, they served as an oasis for a community in crisis. Members and their loved ones were regularly dying of AIDS. It is to Carroll's great credit that she allows her subjects' voices to shine through here. Whether discussing the surge of joy that came from being part of a demonstration, the role of sexual energy in a meeting, or the sense of relief and acceptance found in a community of politicized friends, these passages do the most to reveal what lies at the heart of so many progressive movements: strong social bonds and activists' own sense of being transformed by their participation. My heart puckered in recognition at one WHAM! member's speculation that she and her fellows "had more of an impact on ourselves than we did on the larger world" (184). This was not a denigration of WHAM!'s achievements but an admission of a humbling and important truth. Throughout the book, Carroll's steady acknowledgment of the social as central rather than tangential to organizational success did lead me to wish for a better understanding of the full arc of these activists' lives. *How* exactly did participation alter them? What specific effects did it have on future relationships, careers, and activism?

All in all, the artful combination of more than fifty original oral history interviews with more traditional, archival sources such as newspapers and organizational records makes for a textured, satisfying account of social movement organizing. Even as it charts the increasingly strong chokehold of a conservative political economy, *Mobilizing New York* shows that meaningful resistance adapted and persisted. It adds complexity to the 1980s and early 1990s without trying to rehabilitate those years. As we once again find ourselves protesting hatred and inequality outside Donald Trump's luxury high-rises, we find we cannot afford not to complicate this not-so-distant past. We need there to have been meaningful resistance then because we sorely need it now.

Endnotes

1. Sonia Song-Ha Lee, *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement: Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and the Pursuit of Racial Justice in New York City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Adina Back, "'Parent Power': Evelina Lopez Antonetty, the United Bronx Parents, and the War on Poverty," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History*, eds. Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2011): 184-208; Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Nancy Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
Back to Text

Lana Dee Povitz is a doctoral candidate at New York University. Her work explores food and anti-hunger politics in New York City, activist trajectories, and social movement organizing in twentieth-century American history.

back to top