



The Edges of Politics: Notes on Carolyn Gallaher's *On the Fault Line*¹

Cindi Katz

Graduate Center, City University of New York, USA Email: ckatz@gc.cuny.edu

On the Fault Line is an innovative, insightful, and important book. In attempting to come to terms with the political force and cultural appeal of right wing movements, Carole Gallaher takes on a crucial set of concerns. It is a daunting task in many respects. Studying and working closely with those with whom we differ and disagree remains rare – in part because it is so disagreeable in many ways, and in part because it is so difficult. And yet, Gallaher has been able to do this with respect and verve. That she was able to maintain and convey a deeply critical stance to the politics of those with whom she worked without either disrespecting them for holding these beliefs or reducing them to cartoons, demonstrates not only great sensitivity but a rare coupling of methodological rigor and compassionate critical intelligence. These are the hallmarks of a gifted ethnographer and scholar.

Carole Gallaher uses the U.S. Patriot Movement as a means of examining the connections, intersections, and concealments between identity politics and class politics. In doing so, she brings the insights of poststructuralist theory and political economic analysis to bear upon one another in a way that enriches both. Her book offers crucial insights not only into the Movement itself, but into the means by which people affected and displaced by globalization and other large scale political economic processes formulate their identities and make sense of the conditions of their everyday lives. She demonstrates how space affects and is affected by various political formations, how 'whiteness' is reproduced and ricochets with class (and gender) identifications, and how political positions are maintained and carried discursively. Gallaher's nuanced sociospatial analysis of the inter-workings of class, race, and (to a lesser extent) gender – and the ways

¹ © Cindi Katz, 2004.

anxieties around these identifications propel the commitments of Movement members as they grapple with the reeling effects of neoliberalism – ensure the place and importance of her book not only for those who want to understand the edges of contemporary politics, but something of what’s going on in people’s guts as they grapple with the shifts spurred by neoliberal globalism.

Indeed, one of Gallaher’s motivations was to understand why people in the Patriot Movement went right instead of left in the face of these shifts and the concerns they engender. More to the point, she wanted to know where leftist movements were in their organizing around class; why they apparently had nothing to offer those embittered, threatened, and angered by the loss of their jobs and livelihoods thanks to the changes in corporate capitalism and government policy that get glossed as globalization and neoliberalism respectively. Though not explicitly stated, an important question that snakes through the book – and many people’s current political concerns – is why did the left abdicate its association with (and brand of) populism – leaving that word and its associated practices to the right? Gallaher’s desire to understand the Patriot Movement, then, was intended not so much to ‘expose’ them as to ‘expose’ us – the left, broadly defined – and our failings to ourselves. Her ambition was to assist, if not goad, leftist political organizers to find a way to reach, make sense to, and recruit people with concerns and sensibilities like those drawn to groups like the Patriot Movement.

These ambitions and concerns raise the question of methodology, and provoke some of its enduring dilemmas. In the text and a methodological postscript Gallaher notes that she drew on ‘poststructuralist methodology.’ I don’t really see this. To be blunt, I don’t even know what a poststructuralist methodology is, or more precisely, how what Gallaher did was particularly poststructuralist. She seems to be saying that poststructuralist methodology is mindful of power differentials between the researcher and researched, but this awareness has been incorporated into virtually all ‘post-positivist’ research and has even been recognized by many working in more positivist ways. What, if anything, is peculiar to this research about the poststructuralist recognition of power and its uneven flows? While Gallaher’s project wasn’t exactly ‘studying up,’² it was one that involved politically savvy people, and throughout the book their ability not only to represent themselves and their claims, but to get Carole to see them and convey them herself, is what shines through. Who was exercising what kinds of power? Taking seriously the uneven power relations that crop up in virtually all research endeavors has myriad effects upon the process, experience, and products of the process. As often as not these effects may be other than we expect, or like, or feel comfortable with. Gallaher might have made more, much more, of these eventualities instead of championing something as opaque and unnecessary as a poststructuralist methodology. To this end, it is interesting to compare projects such as Gallaher’s with those typically associated with participatory action research, wherein the researcher incorporates the positions as well as the social and political agendas of the participants so that there is an almost synergistic relationship between politics and research as much as researchers and participants.

Gallaher also suggests that poststructuralist methodology encourages an openness to difference that she interprets as putting aside biases. I disagree. It seems to me that one

² “Studying up” is a term for studying people or groups who are seen as having equal or greater social and political power as the researcher in the researcher’s social milieu.

of the good things associated with what Gallaher is calling poststructuralism was that it forced us to realize our biases; to see that what we saw was not from nowhere, but from lots of wheres, particular wheres, and that those wheres matter. Methodologically, that recognition translates not into a putting aside of biases but into a deepened awareness of how they guide and infiltrate our projects. The danger has been that poststructuralist researchers get so caught up in the self-reflexivity project that they forget that they're working with others. We've suffered through enough ethnographies about ethnographers and ethnographic angst to kill a horse. Mercifully Carole Gallaher's project isn't that. Quite the opposite. *On the Fault Line* was a positioned and principled stance against the political positions advocated by those with whom Gallaher worked, wherein she sought to reveal what got them to those perspectives. She excavates the ideas and material social practices that sustained members of the American Patriot Movement *not* to understand them *without* bias, but so that – because of her biases – she might help political movements that she supports to become more sensitive and sensible to them. As the book makes clear, the Patriots are not 'loonies,' but a large and growing group of disaffected angry people not well served by corporate capitalism or the contemporary U.S. State, and leftist organizations should be working harder to figure out how to reach them. There are lots of fault lines to talk about here.