



Thoughts on Carolyn Gallaher's *On the Fault Line*¹

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On the Fault Line is an important book for a number of reasons. It is a well-crafted, detailed ethnographic study of an all-too-seldom studied right wing movement. As such, it helps to fill a major gap in our knowledge of right wing movements. In particular, it helps us understand the “patriot” movement by placing its recruitment and mobilization activities in context. But perhaps most importantly, it provides insight into the sources of “patriot” grievances and shows how the left could respond to and mobilize the very same people.

Right wing movements have long been ignored by scholars who study social movements. Understandably, social movement scholars, who are almost exclusively on the left, would much rather devote significant parts of their lives to the study of movements with which they agree, often with the intent of identifying more effective strategies for progressive movement mobilization. There’s nothing wrong with that, but in the process the larger portion of the public that does not mobilize around progressive causes is often ignored. As a consequence, our understanding of right wing mobilization is stunted. Rarely do we consider whether those who have come to support the right might just as well have been organized by the left; it’s much easier to simply dismiss the other side and fall back on simplistic stereotypes of a fundamentally different right wing Other.

It is to her great credit that Carole Gallaher avoids this easy, common, and ultimately counterproductive practice. Having grown up in the rural southern United States, Carole understands the complexity of rural right wing movements and refuses to dismiss the progressive potential of the rural poor. Rather, she recognizes the very real

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grievances of poor rural populations and acknowledges the right has been far more effective in responding to these grievances than the left.

Carole argues that the rural poor have been the victims of globalization-driven job loss and the neoliberal destruction of government support programs. The causes of the rural poor's suffering presents a clear opening for progressive class politics, but other identification and mobilization possibilities exist among the predominantly "white" rural poor. Indeed, the right has effectively mobilized the rural poor primarily along racial rather than class lines, blaming rural problems on the United Nations (representing "culturally inferior" Others) and ethnic minorities. Add the fact that the federal government has been extremely unresponsive to rural concerns and that the mainstream political parties offer no meaningful solutions, and one can see how a xenophobic, nationalistic (expressed in localist form) "patriot" movement could find fertile ground. The radical right has organized portions of the rural poor by creating a "chain of equivalence" of people of color, the United Nations, and the federal government (supposedly captured by the forces of world government) that exploits rural anxieties over globalization. In short, the patriot movement provides scapegoats while covering over problematic racial positions with nationalistic rhetoric. It offers purely symbolic solutions, leaving the causes of rural suffering unaddressed.

Carole's analysis, accordingly, proceeds along two lines. She analyzes the way in which identity is constructed as an integral part of movement mobilization. And she looks at the economic suffering caused by globalization and the dismantling of government subsidy programs. Indeed, one of the most compelling and powerful aspects of *On the Fault Line* is the way in which it weaves together and largely reconciles poststructural identity theory—primarily drawing on Chantal Mouffe's work—and more traditional Marxist class analysis—exemplified by David Harvey's work. As readers of this journal are well aware, these two strands of critical theory have often been posed in opposition to each other, with the debate between the two camps sometimes sinking into vitriol. *On the Fault Line* presents an even-handed account of both bodies of thought, drawing what is useful from each, e.g., poststructural notions of fluid category definition, and Marxist notions of oppression rooted in the extraction of surplus value. The result is an analysis that demonstrates that the grievances of the rural poor are fundamentally class-based, but shows that those grievances have been funnelled into a regressive political form through discourses of patriotism. The central lesson, Carole argues, is that alternative discourses could be constructed to funnel grievances in other ways—progressive ways that actually address the roots of the problem: globalization and neoliberalism.

Carole has identified an important part of the problem any leftist movement faces when trying to mobilize new support. We must understand that identity construction is fluid and directly related to the discourses we use to construct and understand the world. We must also understand the potential to reconstruct and redefine the terms through which the world is viewed. For instance, a class-based definition of nation may have considerable progressive potential, while a race-based definition of nation clearly does not. But while the construction of progressive discourses and identities is crucial, I'm not convinced it is sufficient. Consider, for instance, the ultimate right wing movement: the Nazis of Weimar Germany. In their 1994 study of the 1930 German election, John O'Loughlin, Colin Flint, and Luc Anselin found a full range of political discourses present across Germany—from communist to socialist to centrist to Christian democrat to Nazi. In the context of viable

alternative discourses, workers supported the Nazis in some regions and rejected them in others. Clearly, other processes and mechanisms of social and political mobilization were in operation, varying on a regional basis. Consider also the politics of rural western Massachusetts. Much like rural Kentucky, rural western Massachusetts has greatly suffered from globalization and neoliberalism, yet it has also been the seat of some major progressive movements, in particular the US peace movement (Miller 2000). Why the very different politics despite similar circumstances? Differences in dominant discourses are likely part of the explanation, but I suspect the differences go further.

In short, I believe we need to examine a wider range of processes and mechanisms underlying social movement mobilization, how those processes and mechanisms interact, and how they vary among places. While discourses (the stories we tell ourselves about how the world works) and identities (how we as groups and individuals position ourselves within those stories) are crucial, they by no means exhaust the range of processes and mechanisms we need to consider. There is much that is useful in the contemporary social movements literature in sociology and political science that can help us in this effort. And, fortunately, there have been some very good recent attempts to synthesize this huge literature. Sidney Tarrow's (2002) *Power in Movement* provides a wide-ranging treatment of role of political institutions, political opportunity structures, and state strategies in shaping the struggles of social movements, while Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly's (2001) *Dynamics of Contention* identifies specific processes and mechanisms of contention: brokerage, category formation, object shift, certification, elite defection, and others. These works attempt to move away from compartmentalized treatments of contentious politics and share a deep respect for contingency and place-based differences. Once we look at the full range of processes and mechanisms, and how they interact and play out in different places, we will have a better sense of how discourse and identity construction can shape the successes and failures of social movements. In the meantime, Carole Gallaher's excellent book has given us some very important questions to ponder and strategies to consider.

References

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