



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

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Bothering with the Right: Activist Researchers on the Fault Line

In the methodological note that closes her new study on the Kentucky patriot movement, Carolyn Gallaher recounts a moment familiar to many of us who work on places, groups, and movements unpopular among the academic left. An acquaintance, she writes, cornered her at a conference, “worried that because I was studying patriots I had become ‘one of them’” (239).

On The Fault Line sets out to challenge academic stereotypes of “them” as “angry white men with guns,” instead emphasizing how patriots are threatened by global economic restructuring, and how they, when scratched, reveal some surprisingly progressive political colors. Gallaher’s refusal to prejudice her subjects, together with her sense of political urgency and self-reflexivity, is exemplary for activist geographers who study the right. Her political vision is less satisfying but still provocative, and opens a discussion around critical questions of praxis.

As a starting point, we should consider our colleagues’ distaste for our informants, often rooted in feelings of class or cultural superiority, but also reflecting a justifiable ambivalence about the worth of our political projects. Why should we bother, as Gallaher suggests, drawing right-wing patriots into the left? There are many collectivities who are subject to, and/or who resist, the daily occurrence of exploitation, humiliation, and death. Why wouldn’t the activist researcher spend her time on the struggles of these groups? Further, do we not risk compromising crucial elements of left politics when we attempt to

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capture the right? What about the danger that our research could buttress right-wing movements rather than sap them? Is trying to convert the right worth it?

Gallaher responds to the last question with an emphatic “yes,” though she is honest about her project’s limitations. She reflects, for example, on the potential misuse of her research both before and after interviewing a movement leader for a patriot-produced television segment. She also cautions readers that organizing the rural right will require compromise on hot-button issues such as gun control.

These concerns are nonetheless secondary to her political vision, which is grounded in optimism and empathy for her subjects. Though she never romanticizes her interviewees and implies that they are currently the left’s political “foes,” her assessment of patriot potential remains hopeful: “not only are all people mobilizable by the progressive left but also [...] social trajectories put in place by movements such as the Patriot Movement are not set in stone, but rather are subject to meaningful intervention” (24).

Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe (1995; also Mouffe 1993), Gallaher suggests that patriots are not dangerous because they differentiate themselves from “others” (along the lines of race, sexual orientation, etc.), but rather because those differences warrant “metaphorical and physical destruction” of those others (34). The category of patriot allows this “antagonistic” racial and cultural position to be coded in a nationalist discourse powerful enough to submerge class-based grievances in a racist strain of libertarianism. As a remedy, she suggests recasting “patriotism” as a “citizenship” that celebrates differences and commits the state to protect its citizens from global economic restructuring.

This vision may be appealing for its optimism, but it neglects three important and related issues. First, it assumes a voluntarism that underestimates the depth of attachment to structural privilege. White supremacist ideology and the defense of structural white privilege, for example, have recently been articulated with patriot identity, but retain an autonomous power independent of the movement.² The idea of a state that mediates global economic change might draw some patriots into a “universal” politics, while others would remain attached to the privileges that their racial (and gender, and class) positions afford them. Gallaher’s extended review of whiteness literature and her acknowledgement of white supremacy’s power within the movement suggest that she would not disagree. But they do not lead her to envision how these splits would fit into the book’s political vision of a reconstituted citizenship. If we are attentive to these splits, we can re-frame the guiding question “can and should we organize the right?” as “can and should we organize parts of the right?”

If the guardians of privilege would form an “outside” to this new form of citizenship, the relationship between “inside” and “outside” is likely to be antagonistic. Just as important, however, is the second issue of antagonism within citizenship. For a celebration of others’ differences and the recognition of multiple identities within ourselves might be incompatible with explicit calls for the destruction of “others,” but it does not seem incompatible with the reproduction of privilege or the development of corporatist politics. Either could prevent the benefits of a mediating state from redounding

² Here I draw on the distinction made between “white privilege” and “white supremacy” in Pulido (2000).

to all of its citizens. Moreover, even a nationalism that supports an inclusive vision of citizenship leaves the status of immigrants – especially those who do not seek citizenship – in doubt, and marginalizes international political projects. In short, this new citizenship might operate as an ideological stepping-stone for the patriots, but others might gain little without further organizing (and fracturing) the converted right.

This begs a final question: what could the inclusion of the white, working-class fraction of the right bring to the left?³ Most broadly, it may better enable us to resist displacement of the social and economic crises onto bounded collectivities and localities.⁴ Demands from social movements that are limited to particular political identities (including class identities) can become mired in that identity's history and effectively controlled.⁵ At other times, activist groups can be spatially contained, until they learn to “jump,” produce, and choose their scales of struggle.⁶ With the inclusion of fractions of the white working-class or fractions broken from right-wing political formations, existing left movement can re-create their projects in ways less manageable and spatially limited.

One way to do this might be, as Gallaher suggests, calling for the reconstruction of the state as a mediating institution. It could also occur, for example, in campaigns against pollution or for public health, in attempts to shelter local economies from the market, in fights against police power, or in the establishment of worker centers. Beyond such efforts, the search for opportunities to dismantle material and discursive structures – including those that marginalize patriots – must take precedence over the political inclusion of the right.

This priority might seem trivial, but it ultimately affects how we do our research. Do we approach right-wing movements looking for what we can wedge away, or do we see all of our research subjects as “potentially mobilizable by the left”? The former builds deeper alliances, but the latter resolves the dilemma of an activist researcher who finds herself on the fault line, between her obligations to extant and hoped-for lefts. My relative pessimism about the limits of organizing the right and about what a poststructural pluralism could provide lead me to believe that this personal, political, and theoretical question needs more work. After informants give us their time and affection, and take us into their confidence, must we betray them?

³ Though Gallaher writes that patriots are working-class, their objective and subjective class positions remain murky. The latter are backgrounded throughout the text, but are nonetheless important; the multiplicity of subjective class identities (consumer, homeowner, taxpayer) might disrupt the neat class-consciousness of the globalization-affected rural resident and consequently the unity of citizens calling for a mediating state.

⁴ Discussions of the relationship between social and economic crises can be found in O'Connor (1973) and Gilmore (2002), *inter alia*.

⁵ For a specific treatment, see Wendy Brown's (1995) discussion of the politics of injury under liberalism (Chapter 3).

⁶ See, for example, Neil Smith's discussion of spatial strategies in his work on the homeless (1993) and gentrification opponents (1996).

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