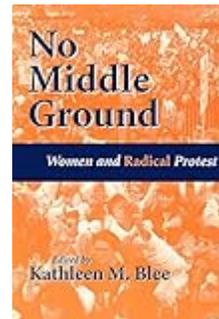




Kathleen M. Blee, ed. *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1998. viii + 340 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-1280-1; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1279-5.



ed. Kathleen M. Blee. *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1998. viii + 340 pp.

Reviewed by Katherine M. Osburn (Tennessee Technological University)

Published on H-Women (January, 1999)

***No Middle Ground* Reviewed**

In *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest*, editor Kathleen M. Blee notes that, while scholars have paid extensive attention to “feminism and other women’s rights movements,” women’s involvement in many other social movements has, until recently, been neglected (p. 2). Blee argues that this oversight stems from the manner in which popular understanding, and some scholarship, makes radicalism synonymous with men: “The challenging, provoking, demanding stance of radical activism evokes images of men who make public claims on the state. When women act, their activism is regarded differently” (p. 2). When their political actions are examined, women are often viewed as pawns of men or as expressing unfocused, irrational anger. Further, until recently, women have been identified almost exclusively with left wing politics; their involvement in right wing movements has been overlooked. Yet, according to Blee, women bring “a distinctly gendered presence” to political activism and, thus, their involvement in social movements must be addressed if we are to have a complete

understanding of radical politics. This collection of essays seeks to account for women’s presence in radical activism on both ends of the political spectrum.

Blee argues that “to understand the full range of women’s radical action, it is necessary to define radical action in an inclusive way” (p. 3). She offers a dictionary definition of a radical as “one who seeks reforms that go to the root of a problem” and notes that these changes may envision a more egalitarian society or a less equal one (p. 3). A radical may pursue an essentially new social order or lead resistance to change in fundamental social arrangements. Further, Blee exhorts her readers to remember context: behavior that is seen as radical in one arena may not be viewed as radical in another. These definitions, however, do not really tell us much about the role of gender in radicalism.

Blee then suggests that a gender-inclusive analysis must begin with methodology. The study of radical

political action must be redefined to encompass movement goals and tactics that reveal previously invisible actors. For example, studies of radical organizations should focus on not only on the public behavior of leaders, but on the inner dynamics of the movement. Looking beyond the established leadership sometimes reveals women building radical organizations in a crucial way by strengthening the personal connections of activists within the group. Moreover, an emphasis on gender also means that scholars must study “protopolitical” groups—neighborhoods, kinship groups, and friendships—where women’s activism often takes place. By broadening the scope of analysis, gender appears to be very important in radical organizing and objectives.

No Middle Ground rescues women’s radicalism from obscurity in fifteen essays that contain both first person accounts of women’s experiences and scholarly analysis of gender and social movements. Thus, the book reflects several methodologies including interviews, analysis of traditional archival sources, biographical and autobiographical narratives, and critiques based on social and feminist theory. Blee organizes the essays into four thematic sections, and her wonderfully cogent introduction to the collection analyzes how each of the articles illuminates the larger themes of women’s radical politics. The papers themselves are quite varied. While always providing an interesting narrative and meaningful information on women’s activities, some of them do not draw significant conclusions about gender and activism. Thus, Blee’s introduction is especially useful in helping the general reader know what larger point should be drawn from some of the stories.

Part One asks how women’s identification with a movement provides them with a public, political identity. Pam Goldman’s essay on FBI harassment of various leftist students—gay, lesbian, feminist, and socialist activists—at the University of Kentucky in Lexington documents how women responded to FBI labeling of the community as “radical” by becoming “radicalized.” Once perceived as the “Other,” white middle-class students experimenting with leftist political identities came to embrace the label as self-identity. Shirley Jackson traces African American women’s discomfort with the “feminist” label to their alienation from the middle class “whiteness” of the movement and the African American community’s own characterization of feminism as “lesbian dominated” and anti-male. Sonya Paul and Robert Perkinson find a similar issue in their interview with Winona LaDuke. La Duke also rejects identification with feminism because she perceives the movement as too focused on issues that have

little to do with the problems facing Indigenous peoples.

Part Two explores the connections between personal life and political action. Belinda Roberts’ superb analysis of social movement theory and gender argues that women in the early Civil Rights movement effectively used emotional appeals to mobilize activists and push the movement past impasses encountered by the limits of so-called “rational” strategies. Though dismissed by many scholars of Civil Rights as “irrational,” women’s willingness to appeal to emotion was “an important organizing tool” that helped build the movement (p. 87). The recollections of women caught up in the turmoil over integrating Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 illustrate how women’s memories of the personal styles of their classmates shaped their interpretations of the political issues of integration. Karen Baird-Olson’s account of her years as an activist in the American Indian Movement (AIM) recounts how AIM activism affected the personal lives of participants and the communities of “First Peoples.”

Part Three reveals the nature of the complex and contradictory ties that bind people to activist politics. Antifeminist activists in New Right organizations are the focus of Susan Marshall’s excellent study. Marshall finds that commitment to antifeminist groups “can serve as a bridge to women’s activism for the broader conservative agenda” (p. 156). Organizing women around gender can especially mobilize a constituency for attacks on the political demands of racial and ethnic minorities. Kathleen Blee’s superb analysis of women in racist groups also questions how gender can link up with race in right wing ideology. Belief in the superiority of the white race was closely identified with a belief in traditional gender roles, for racists contended that white women’s willingness to bear children was crucial to racial survival. Women in racist organizations, however, often held views in opposition to movement leadership, and Blee argues that their commitment to racist ideology may have been superficial. Feminist disarmament activists Cynthia Costello and Amy Dru Stanley recount their experiences creating “an alternative lived feminist community of peace” at the Seneca, New York Army Depot in 1983. The narrative explores how divisions among the activists over ideology, tactics, and goals, in addition to conflict with nearby townspeople continually challenged the women to rethink their agendas. Finally, Jane Margolis’s account of her ten years in a Marxist/Leninist/ Trotskyist party is an absorbing account of “groupthink” in a radical left party.

How public activism changes or fails to change domestic life is the theme of the final section. Margaret Rose's outstanding multilayered analysis of gender in the National Farm Workers Association (NRWA) contrasts how men viewed their participation in union activities between 1965-1975 with women's perceptions of activism, and demonstrates how union participation of both sexes changed gender roles and self-identities both within the union and the family. By comparing men and women's experiences, Rose not only documents women's activities but also places gender at the center of her analysis. Similarly, in her superlative study of the 1970 Boston antibusing movement, Julia Wrigley accounts for women's activism by looking at how both sexes responded to court desegregation orders. Wrigley posits that women took control of the movement because working class gender roles segregated men and women's work, assigning concern with education to the female role. Consequently, women's participation in the movement changed little about gender roles. Sally Maggard skillfully evaluates the complex interaction of region, gender and class in her exploration of a strike by women hospital support staff to gain recognition of their union (the Communication Workers of America) in a Kentucky hospital. She documents how Appalachian men and women integrated tactics and strategy into existing gender roles, as male relatives of striking women provided protection and took the "dangerous" shifts on the picket lines at night. Gender figured, in part, in the lack of support for the strike, for townspeople saw women's nurturing work as their proper "sphere" and resented their demands for adequate compensation and autonomy. Considerations of class, however, also undermined the women's efforts, for most of the professional women hospital staff opposed the strikers. The section ends with an interview with Lois Gibbs, founder of the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste. Gibbs describes how her concern for her family and community led her to organize for environmental justice.

No Middle Ground is a wonderfully absorbing book with much engaging information about women's activism. By documenting women's activities where they have previously been ignored, the collection provides a more complete picture of social movements. In this sense, all of the articles are very worthwhile reading. The most stimulating articles, however—those by Robnett, Marshall, Blee, Rose, and Wrigley—provide a summary of the current literature on gender as a category of analysis in social movement theory and document how

the particular study contributes to the scholarship. Moreover, articles that contrast men and women most effectively demonstrate how gender is an important variable in understanding both the experiences of these women and their impact on political radicalism. Personal recollections and interviews, while providing valuable knowledge on women's lives, do not really account for the role of gender in the activism under question. For example, the reader may well ask, how does the fact that Lois Gibbs is a woman impact her activism? Is the inclusion of the interview with her in the collection simply highlighting that a woman is engaged in important environmental justice work or should we draw larger essentialist conclusions about women's nurturing as they attempt to protect their communities? Similar questions arise concerning the women described in Costello and Stanley's article about the Seneca women's peace encampment. What do the authors mean to say about women when they discuss the "exclusively female peace actions [that] stress the value of women's perspective?" What precisely is the "women's perspective" and how does it differentiate female peace activists from male peace activists? Is gender really the key variable in the decision to go to war or to resist militarism? Do women somehow suffer more or differently from war than do men? Likewise, one might question if the leadership of Jane Margolis's Marxist/Leninist/ Trotskyist activist group would also have harassed any man who challenged their authority, or was her treatment unique because she was a woman?

The lack of this kind of analysis in some of the articles, however, does not diminish the usefulness of the book for teaching. Instructors and students alike will probably raise these questions as they read the book. Moreover, this discrepancy between articles most likely reflects that fact that the contributors are both academic and non-academic scholars. The broad selection of disciplines and approaches, then, also makes *No Middle Ground* valuable in the classroom as a means of making students think about how different academic and non-academic writers approach the same topic, and how an editor of such a collection finds meaningful themes for organizing a variety of ideas. *No Middle Ground* is a significant reader that raises important questions about identity, consciousness, and gender in political activism that operates apart from the "middle ground" of mainstream political actions.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

Citation: Katherine M. Osburn. Review of Blee, Kathleen M., ed., *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest* and Kathleen M. Blee, ed., *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2661>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.