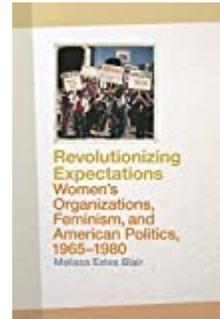




**Melissa Estes Blair.** *Revolutionizing Expectations: Women's Organizations, Feminism, and American Politics, 1965-1980.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014. 224 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-4713-4; \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3979-5.



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## Second-Wave Feminism's Mainstream Engines

Melissa Estes Blair's *Revolutionizing Expectations: Women's Organizations, Feminism, and American Politics, 1965-1980* begins with an important political question: what role do long-standing, mainstream organizations in civil society play in promoting transformative change? Put differently, in what ways do new social movements benefit from the work of existing organizations, despite the older organizations's less radical political agendas? Blair examines this question with regard to second-wave feminism in the United States, which she rightly calls "one of the most rapid periods of change in women's lives in American history" (p. 150). She argues that the effectiveness of this movement can be fully understood only when we look beyond second-wave feminism's intellectual leaders and flagship organizations to the work of mainstream women's groups that predated second-wave feminism. Many of these groups would not even consider themselves "feminist." The most prominent among these organizations are the League of Women Voters (LWV) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). By placing these mainstream

organizations at the center of her research, Blair helps to illuminate the complex political environment in which "sudden" societal change appears to occur.

Blair begins her inquiry in 1965, just prior to second-wave feminism's full emergence. She selects three case studies in which to explore her research questions: Durham, North Carolina; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Denver, Colorado. By focusing on three distinct urban settings, in different parts of the country, her research design allows her to examine, and compare, the unique cultural context of each city and how this mattered to the successes and failures of the broader feminist movement. Blair's research combines primary and secondary sources, making excellent use of interviews with activists and archival materials. The book is well researched, clearly organized, and persuasively argued.

Blair's central argument is essentially this: members of mainstream women's organizations played a mediating but crucial role in the successes of second-wave feminism. They did so in two specific ways. First, they helped

translate national ideas and campaigns (most important, the decade-long effort to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment [ERA]) into programs and agendas that would address the needs of local communities. Second, because of their established presence in their home communities, long-standing women's organizations helped to soften the local political environment by making more radical ideas seem less threatening. Blair argues that culturally embedded, mainstream women's groups played a similar role in the women's movement that they played in the civil rights movement. In Durham, for example, members of mainstream women's organizations ... introduced their neighbors and coworkers to feminist ideas in much the same way that they had helped ease the integration of Durham's schools (p. 40). In other words, by working through existing organizations essentially enconcing feminism in existing, respectable women's spaces, organizations like the YWCA and the LWV enabled the creation of a vibrant feminist community in Durham and changed many residents' minds about supporting the goals of the women's movement (p. 41).

The book has five chapters. In chapter 1, "Women's Grassroots Political Activism in the 1960s," Blair provides an overview of women's grassroots political activism in each of her cities in the decade leading up to the height of second-wave feminism. Chapters 2 through 4 the heart of the book present her case studies.

In chapter 2, "Race and Feminism in a Southern City: Durham, North Carolina," Blair's analysis focuses on the Durham YWCA, the organization that took the lead in advancing feminist goals. Most interesting here is Blair's discussion of how the YWCA evolved from being resource provider and meeting place for women's voluntary groups to being the center of Durham's vibrant feminist community. By the early 1970s, the YWCA was housing a rape crisis hotline, offering abortion counseling, and advocating for abortion rights. Even more compelling is Blair's documentation of how the YWCA helped foster a women's movement in Durham that was racially integrated. By examining the YWCA's work in Durham during the height of second-wave feminism, Blair is able to show how it was indeed possible for feminists to bridge racial divides, and to do so in a major southern city.

Chapters 3 and 4, which focus on women's groups in Indianapolis and Denver, respectively, provide an interesting contrast to Blair's narrative in Durham. Chapter 3, titled "Feminist Coalitions and the ERA: Indianapolis," shows how it was not the YWCA, but the LWV in

Indianapolis that was the dynamic force in local feminist politics. By focusing on the work of the local LWV, Blair's analysis helps explain how this conservative city was able to reach one of the most important goals of the second-wave women's movement: the adoption of the ERA. Whereas the movement in Durham used outsider tactics to pursue its goals, the Indianapolis movement used a combination of outsider-insider lobbying: "The combination of direct protest action and one-to-one lobbying shows the creativity and flexibility that women in Indiana used to see the ERA to success there" (p. 94). The analysis in this chapter also reminds us that many of the women's movement's successes in the 1970s depended on bipartisan support, from Republican politicians and Democrats. "Richard Lugar and Mary Ann Butters are examples of grassroots Republican feminists, and their involvement in feminist action in Indianapolis shows how widespread acceptance of some feminist ideas had become" (p. 82).

In chapter 4, "Not by Tearing Down: Politics and Feminism in Denver," Blair's analysis presents a fragmented local feminist community that adopted a reformist agenda that focused on legal equality and individualism, rather than a radical agenda that sought to alter gender roles. This was due to a variety of reasons, not least of which was the prominence of Republican women in the forefront of the Colorado women's movement. In Denver, it was again the YWCA that channeled the work of the national movement. Here, the LWV, unlike in Indianapolis, was the more conservative force; it never embraced feminism. Blair notes that "as late as 1970 the leadership of the Denver League was either unaware of the vast new opportunities feminism was creating for women or unwilling to engage with them" (p. 113). Most interesting in this chapter is Blair's analysis of the complicated relationship between women's rights advocates working inside government and those working outside formal political channels. Colorado had elected a relatively large number of women to the state legislature, and they were able to support the work of the local feminist community. As Blair writes, "women in explicitly feminist and preexisting women's organizations ... worked together with legislators to secure many of feminism's goals" (p. 107). Success was most evident on the issue of abortion. Colorado was the first state in the country to liberalize its abortion laws. Blair concludes, however, that working through the legislative channels had a cost: it led women's groups to focus on an agenda oriented around legislative reform rather than more radical institutional change. For example, abortion laws were liber-

alized, but only to a point; women's groups did not advocate for abortion on demand. Blair also shows how the local women's movement's reliance on the legislature, rather than mobilization of women's groups, to pass the ERA was a lost opportunity to bring more women into the feminist community in Colorado. In short, because "feminism flowed through a state-funded government agency [the Colorado Commission on the Status of Women]," the feminist community in Denver "addressed only some aspects of the women's movement's critiques of American society—those that could be most easily or effectively addressed through legislation" (p. 108). Blair's analysis in this case study again reminds us of the key role that Republican women played in the feminist movement during this era.

Chapter 5, "Responses to Conservatism and the Evolution of Political Tactics," traces the evolution of the backlash against feminism that emerged in the latter part of the 1970s in all three cities, as well as across the country. Most interesting here is Durham, where the effort to pass the ERA failed. Blair attributes this loss to Durham women's reluctance to work outside the parameters of "community gendered norms," norms that valued "lady-like" behavior by white women and "respectability" for African American women. She writes: "The failure to secure ratification of the ERA in North Carolina highlights the shortcomings of that tactic" (p. 138). Blair argues that more aggressive tactics used by ERA proponents in Indianapolis might have been more effective in pushing the ERA "across the finish line in North Carolina" (p. 138).

In the brief conclusion to the book, Blair reiterates her thesis, and again makes the case for expanding the focus of analysis of second-wave feminism to include the experiences of women who were not the movement's national, intellectual leaders. Somewhat like playwright Tom Stoppard telling the story of the peripheral characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet* in order to provide a fuller picture of the tragedy, Blair's book similarly shifts our attention away from the usual focus on second-wave feminism's national leadership to provide a more inclusive and accurate analysis of the movement's work. By doing so, she reminds us that the popular narrative of second-wave feminism—the well-documented failures (most notably the ERA) and the fierce backlash against its agenda—leads us to overlook the less obvious but surely more pervasive, profound, and enduring ways that the feminist movement changed our world. As she writes: "Focusing solely on what was not accomplished obscures the tremendous victories of a generation of feminist activists who worked in all kinds of organizations in cities throughout the country to bring about one of the most rapid periods of change in women's lives in American history" (p. 150). Though Blair's book succeeds on many levels, it might have benefitted from sharper editing, as there are repetitive sections in the case study chapters. In addition, I would not recommend this book for a general audience but for students and scholars specifically interested in the history of the American feminist movement, or about the ways social movements effect cultural change. For these audiences, *Revolutionizing Expectations* is well worth it.

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