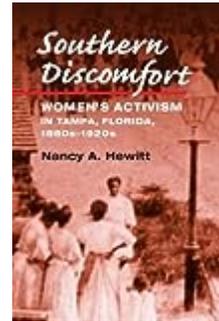


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nancy A. Hewitt. *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s-1920s.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001. ix + 345 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02682-9; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07191-1.



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Nancy A. Hewitt has chosen a rich and complex topic for her book on women's activism in Tampa, Florida. *Southern Discomfort* tells a multifaceted story of women's public life in three distinct Tampa communities. African American, Anglo, and Latin women all played key roles in the emergence of Tampa as a New South city unlike the typical racially bifurcated cities of the South at the close of the nineteenth century. In many ways, the Tampa that unfolds in Hewitt's book looks much more like a southern city of the early twenty-first century in its multiethnic composition and in its emerging global economy. As a result, the book forces historians to rethink many of their conceptualizations of the New South and women's activism within it. At the conclusion of her book, Hewitt suggests, "The social and psychic discomfort created by the convergence of Confederate and Caribbean influences on late-nineteenth-century Tampans inspired women—Latin, African American, and Anglo—to enter the public sphere in efforts to shape the city to their needs and those of their communities. If Miami serves as the model of globalization and its impact on public life in the late twentieth century, Tampa offers an earlier, if less familiar version of this same process. Its history, moreover, illuminates women's central roles as agents as well as objects of change" (p. 271).

The result is an unexpected juxtaposition of local, re-

gional, and even world history in a book that deceptively purports to evaluate the public work of women in a single city but actually speaks to much larger issues such as women's agency, the nature of gender and segregation, and the intersections between gender and colonialism. By showing the sometimes contradictory and sometimes complementary activism of Tampa women and by linking that activism to its local and international context, Hewitt has fashioned a narrative of public women in the South unlike the recent spate of books treating other facets of the topic.

Furthermore, Hewitt's definition of activism is a broad one. Her activists are not just the stereotypical elite, white women's club members, but also include labor union leaders and even individual, working-class women. For the latter, Hewitt spends much time evaluating issues like employment decisions, seeing for example the choice of African American women to take the laundry of Anglos into their own homes as opposed to working in the homes of their employers as an overtly political act. As such, this sophisticated analysis will most appeal to scholars and advanced students working in a variety of areas, specifically women's history, the New South, borderlands, Latin American studies, and urban history. The sometimes dense and jargon-laden prose will appeal less to the casual reader or the beginning undergraduate

student.

Southern Discomfort is divided into two parts with the first containing four chapters exploring the evolution of Tampa as an industrial, international, and multiethnic city along with the role of public women in that process. Women's participation is highlighted in a chapter detailing the varieties of public activism necessary for Tampa's emergence as a leading industrial center for the production of cigars. Never, though, is that story, which unfolds over the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, separated from its larger, regional context. Hewitt's balance, unfortunately for historians of the New South, skews toward Tampa's connections with Cuba and the Caribbean as opposed to contrasts with other emerging New South cities. Part of the reason for such an analytical choice no doubt stems from the geographic and economic proximity between Tampa and Cuba, but a more nuanced evaluation that also contrasted Tampa with places like Birmingham, Atlanta, and Dallas, for example, would have made for an even richer book.

The chapters in the first section of the book that look at women's activism juxtapose the efforts of African American, Anglo, and Latin women by showing the similar and disparate strategies of each ethnicity as they dealt with issues ranging from temperance to the Cuban efforts to overthrow Spanish rule in the 1890s. Hewitt is at her best when she explores the differing tactics of her various protagonists. Her discovery of single-sex, race, and class organizations alongside mixed-sex, race, and class organizations caused her to argue that "women rarely claimed the same constellation of identities throughout their activist careers. At different moments and in ever-changing circumstances, women shifted from liberation movements rooted in national identities to labor movements rooted in class or from self-improvement efforts based in race to political mobilizations focused on gender" (pp. 14-15). However, the evidence that is marshaled to demonstrate this point in the first half of the book is much stronger for the treatment of Latin women than of African American and Anglo women. Again, a major reason no doubt has to do with the very important role that Latin women played in facilitating aid to the Cuban rebels. This minor quibble is much less an issue in the second half of the book, which is more balanced.

The second part of the book covers the first two decades of the twentieth century and is divided into five chapters. The first three treat African American, Anglo, and Latin women individually, while the last two look

at the increasingly single-sex organizational strategy of Tampa women within racial, ethnic, and class categories. Hewitt's examination of African American women in the early twentieth century reveals a wide range of activism from protests against the 1905 Florida law segregating street cars to demands for improved social services and from requests for equal suffrage to elite Black women's club work. At times African American women worked independently of Black men while at other times working in tandem with males. Additionally, Black women occasionally recruited white and Latin allies. From Hewitt's perspective, though, these mixed strategies were not contradictory, but instead reveal a sophisticated political activism ready to meet a variety of challenges. This treatment of African American women combined with the subsequent evaluation of white women contains a much more explicit and helpful evaluation of Tampa women in comparison with their New South counterparts.

Anglo women activists differed in several key ways from both Black and Latin women. First, Anglo women's organizations divided not along class and sex lines but along lines of interest and ideology. Second, Anglo women activists pursued much more limited agendas in comparison, typically focusing on the construction of social and cultural organizations designed to improve the quality of life in Tampa. The most frequent beneficiaries of these efforts were other white people. Finally, Anglo women were less likely to challenge the overall status quo within Tampa. Latin women followed a model akin to that of African Americans except that the former relied on mutual aid societies rather than churches and schools as the locus for their activist agendas, which often centered on questions of workplace justice.

By the mid-1910s, women activists in Tampa were much more likely to define their agenda in terms of sexual discrimination and to work with single-sex groups. Hewitt finds the single-sex activism of the early twentieth century to have both positive and negative consequences for Tampa women by lessening differences of nationality but not race and class. *Southern Discomfort* is an important book that deserves a wide readership among scholars and graduate students. The findings reach far beyond the geographic confines of Tampa, Florida and serve as yet another reminder that historians have only begun to scratch the surface of understanding the complexities of Southern history, women's history, and borderland studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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