

MAKING DEMOCRACY: New Generations of Activism in Los Angeles

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Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles. By Karen Brodtkin. Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007. 219 pages. \$68.00 (cloth). \$23.95 (paper).

The cover of *Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles* features a photograph of civil disobedience in the middle of a major Los Angeles thoroughfare. UNITE HERE workers are seated in a circle surrounded by hundreds of other union laborers and supporters holding placards that read, “Justice for Janitors.” The photo captures the revitalization of social activism that took root in the 1980s and blossomed in the 1990s, largely driven by immigrant workers and organizers. Grounded in Los Angeles in the 1990s, Karen Brodtkin’s book is a fascinating account of political lives at a pivotal time in labor and social activism. As noted on the back cover, she asks questions of profound significance—“What are the personal and emotional dynamics that turn ordinary people into activists...and what are the visions and practices of democracy that foster such transformations?”

Brodtkin explores the emergence of political consciousness and the distinctive political philosophies among a cohort of activists. Using in-depth interviews with a sample of sixteen union organizers, she elicits stories of gendered, working-class, immigrant experiences. The sample, nine women and seven men, the majority of which are college educated, immigrants, or children of

immigrants or refugees from Asia and Latin America, is fairly representative of the larger population of union organizers in Los Angeles. The narrators reflect on how their cultural communities shaped the creation of their political selves, leading them to challenge mainstream and typically degrading views of their culture. Brodtkin emphasizes the centrality of race and gender in the exploitation of labor and the making of their political identity.

As her conceptual starting point, she uses Antonio Gramsci's argument that rulers must use more than force alone to maintain power and hegemony; they must also convince people that the status quo is natural. For Gramsci, ideological struggle occurs as revolutionaries and rulers attempt to shape the way people see themselves. At the core of her study is how those who create social movements construct perspectives oppositional to the dominant point of view and then challenge social injustice. She embeds Gramsci's ideas in the analysis, keeping academic jargon to a minimum.

Generous excerpts from the narratives lucidly support her analysis. Chapter 1, "The Context of Labor and Immigrant Workers' Rights Activism in Los Angeles," identifies the events that transformed the city's working class, including the Central American War, the 1965 immigration laws, and the growth of non-union service jobs, as well as a host of anti-immigrant voter initiatives and the 1992 Rodney King uprising. Set in this context, the 1990s generation of political activists came of age, largely in high school and college campuses. In chapter 2, "Narrators and Narrative," Brodtkin provides an invaluable account of research methods and methodology informed by her stellar body of work and longtime commitment to progressive politics. It explains the rationale for using narratives, discusses the interview process, and recognizes the use of testimonies as "weapons in ideological struggle" against political hegemony that help us understand the creation of political identity

(54). I appreciated her frank admissions that it was a “fortunate accident” that the snowball sample of activists reflected a larger political cohort of Los Angeles organizers and that she “took for granted” that the “nexus of the personal and political” would be discovered in life histories (44-48).

Chapter 3, “Political Identity Starts at Home,” traces how activists created a counterhegemonic narrative from their life experiences. The narrators explain how perceptions of their experiences contested the often degrading assimilationist perspective in scholarly literature. Rejecting the mainstream ideology of Latin American and Asian culture as deficient and questioning “individual success” as the American dream, they drew on their childhood experiences confronting poverty, discrimination, and family struggle to construct a more collective version of the American dream. Chapter 4, “Making Identities Political,” presents the next step in the narrators’ politicization. College allowed them to construct a counterhegemonic vision, to engage in political action, and to make multicultural and transnational connections that expanded the definition of “us.” Each narrator identifies an event—a clerical workers’ strike, an antiwar demonstration, the UCLA hunger strike—that led to an epiphany, further shaping their political consciousness. Many found a home and affirmation of their culture in ethnic studies, Chicana/o studies, and women’s studies departments.

A constructive account of the tensions between political organizers and the typical organizational structure and practices of unions in the 1990s, chapter 5, “Democracy and Praxis,” provides a nuanced analysis of the narrators’ vision of democracy. Rather than simply winning economic benefits for workers, they sought to develop worker leadership. Large and hierarchal, union administration unfortunately often mirrors the racial/ethnic and gender segregation in the workforce. The narrators struggled for nonhierarchal,

collective decision making and a minimal division of labor wherever possible. Although their intent was to create democratic practices within the union, it was often more feasible to do this in community-based organizations. The tensions between unions and organizers were generated by their different views of the working class. Brodtkin argues that unions commonly view the working class as “an already existing entity”, whereas organizers more often view the working class as a potential coalition of groups with overlapping but varied interests (175). This critical distinction problematizes union assumptions that unintentionally erase the gender and ethnic/racial differences central to political identity.

Brodtkin’s book is a compelling account relevant to labor activists, undergraduates, and graduate students across disciplines, including ethnic studies, urban studies, and anthropology. Of particular use in Chicana/Latina studies are Brodtkin’s aptly chosen excerpts of family stories and her insightful analysis of both the strength of mothers and organizers’ constructions of womanhood, an analysis amply supported by references to Chicana scholarship. The methodological discussion in the text and in the appendices will also be useful to graduate students and other scholars in ethnic studies who have long recognized the power of narratives. Brodtkin concludes on an optimistic note: even though social movements rise and decline, and one cohort’s political knowledge seldom gets communicated to the next, “democracy continues to be rediscovered and reinvented by new generations” (183).