

BOOK REVIEW

Family Activism: Immigrant Struggles and the Politics of Noncitizenship

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Family Activism: Immigrant Struggles and the Politics of Noncitizenship.

By Amalia Pallares. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2015. Pp. 192. \$27.95 (paper, Web PDF, or EBook).

Family Activism is an insightful and multifaceted eight-year longitudinal study conducted in Chicago from 2006 to 2013. Pallares vividly provides rich ethnographic descriptions with complex theoretical analyses, leaving the reader confident with their newfound knowledge and encouraged to engage family activism in today's social movements. Pallares' ethnographic study is contextualized in relationship to legal and political changes, namely forced deportation and unjust denial of citizenship and family rights, thus having complicated the legalization process for millions of undocumented immigrants and their families. The author draws on the work of Mae Ngai (2004) to critically illuminate the sense of agency created and implemented among individuals and their families. Pallares introduces Ngai's concept of "impossible activism," which argues that the political rights of undocumented immigrants are not recognized as legitimate. "Impossible activism" involves relying on the politicization of the family to challenge oppression and to obtain rightful justice within contemporary immigration law. *Family Activism* argues that the family has become politically significant in three ways: as a political subject, as a frame for immigrants' rights activism, and as a symbol of racial subordination and resistance.

The deconstruction and subsequent re-conceptualization of family ideology and structure as proposed by Pallares questions traditional familial research where the

family unit is primarily portrayed as a means of resistance via various networks and ideologies of familism. Pallares recognizes the value of such research. However, she suggests that it is essential for researchers to frame the family as a *site of political struggle and as a basis for mobilization in immigrant communities* in order to fully comprehend and contribute to the successful granting of basic human rights.

Pallares builds her argument by mapping different undocumented immigrant activists and organizations to construct, reinforce, but also challenge and redefine existing distinctions and categorizations of families facing separation due to deportation. For example, she provides a discussion of strategies used by two mothers, Elvira Arrellano and Flor Crisostomo, who both sought sanctuary in a Methodist church (Adalberto Unido) in Chicago. Pallares illustrates how both women drew on motherhood as a political strategy. Arrellano's efforts in avoiding her eventual deportation were based on her relationship between herself and her citizen child—a familial relationship that could not be subjected to separation. Arrellano is considered both conforming and challenging: conforming in that she relied on motherhood and challenging in that she engaged in politically transformative spaces—sites and spaces that have not previously existed and where undocumented immigrants have been excluded. Crisostomo, on the other hand, utilized a strategy considered marginal to the acceptable family framework in immigration struggles. She drew on indigeneity and double displacement, an emerging but marginal position in current immigration movements.

Two central chapters explore the collective potential of organizing family with an analysis beginning with the creation of La Familia Latina Unida (LFLU) in 2005 and culminating with the Familias Unidas (FU) campaign in 2009, and the second, which highlights the Immigration Youth Justice League (IYJL). Pallares compares and contrasts a local (LFLU) and a national campaign (FU), and how the family framework is presented and utilized in immigration struggles. She argues the framework challenges the individualization of the

undocumented immigrant by constructing the family as a political subject where the rights of citizens and immigrants are inextricably linked, using family values discourse to illuminate state contradictions, and creating bonds and bridges within the movement. Pallares also points out the limitations of the family framework, the perpetuation of a heteronormative discourse based on worthiness. The heteronormative discourse of worthiness unjustly continues with constructions of citizenship worthiness and immigration laws that have historically excluded undocumented immigrants. The discourse thus argues for the mixed-status family as a worthy exception.

Pallares' discussion concludes by arguing that the family can be framed differently, thus suggesting new directions for the movement. Chicago's IYJL initially employed a strategy of identifying themselves as innocent individuals brought to the US by their parents, and therefore, sought evaluation separate from their parents. After the failure of the 2010 Dream Act vote, youth reassessed their previous neoliberal means of representation and created strategies to highlight their familial relationships and mixed-family status.

In sum, Pallares' complex theoretical framework draws on literature in non-citizenship, political dimensions of the family, and undocumented political subjectivity in deconstructing family values and moving critiques beyond racialization and heteronormativity to include race and citizenship. *Family Activism* is a must read for students from middle school to graduate training, human rights organizations, and public policy makers.

Reference

Ngai, Mae. 2004. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Mothers of Modern America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.