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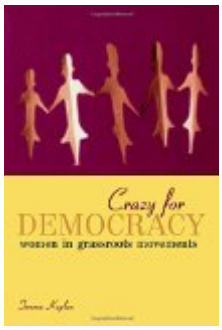
Temma Kaplan. *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grassroots Movements.* New York and London: Routledge, 1997. x + 243 pp. $135.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-91662-2.



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I discovered Temma Kaplan's *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grassroots Movements* while in the process of completing two books on women community activists (Naples 1998a, 1998b). Therefore, although I have never met them, the women in Kaplan's book seem so familiar to me. Of course, most U.S. readers will have heard about Lois Gibbs--one of the six women Kaplan highlights--who came to national prominence through her efforts to fight toxic waste in her community of Love Canal. Those who have more familiarity with the environmental movement may also have read or heard about Dollie Burwell who has been in the forefront of the fight against environmental racism. But, for the most part, as Kaplan points out, women's community activism typically remains invisible to those outside their immediate communities. Kaplan's goal is to correct this blind spot in conceptions of women as political actors. In a highly accessible style, she explores women's motivations for radical political action as well as the creative ways they negotiate the resistance they encounter in their struggles for social justice.

As Kaplan and others who write about women's community-based activism point out, traditional conceptualizations of politics typically do not incorporate this form of political participation. Given the dominant definitions of politics as related primarily to electoral politics or participation in formal social movement organizations, some women community activists also resist viewing their involvement as politics. Many construct their activism as emanating from their social location as mothers and community caretakers, defining it as "civic work" or a "social mission" (Naples 1998b). Patricia Hill Collins (1990) uses the term "community othermothering" to capture this phenomenon. I use the term "activist mothering" to describe the ways that the community activists I studied related to their political and social work on behalf of their families and communities. This conceptualization "draws attention to the myriad ways these women challenged the false separation of productive work, socially reproductive work, and politics" (Naples 1998, p. 4).

Historians of women's social activism emphasize how social reformers of the late 1800s and early 1900s also drew on their identities as women and mothers to justify their entre into the so-called public sphere. Authors who explore the political contributions made by these social reformers often frame their approach as "maternalist politics." Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (1993, p. 4) define maternalism as "ideologies and discourses that exalted women's capacity to mother and applied to society as a whole the values they attached to the role: care, nurturance, and morality." Contributors to the debate over the political efficacy of maternalist politics often question to what extent such approaches reproduce gendered inequality in the political arena. By constructing women's entre into the public arena as based on their position as "citizen mothers," women reinforce the normative definition of citizen as male.

However, while many social reformers drew on their gender identities to describe their activism, they did not adhere to a traditional gender division of labor ideology nor did they believe that all women could unite on the basis of their mothering status. In fact, Wendy Sarvasy (1997) explores the political practice of social-democratic feminists in the first decades of the nineteenth century to offer "a conceptualization of citizenship that highlights community-based social service and participatory democracy" (Naples 1998c, in press) rather than "maternal politics." Their notion of citizenship included, in Sarvasy's assessment (1997, p. 56), "new modes of citizenship activities, a socialized formulation of rights, new spaces for citizen participation, and an emancipatory use of gender difference to expand and to redefine gender equality." Like the women Kaplan interviewed, their political praxis effectively merged expansion of social rights with civil and political rights.

Most of the literature on women social reformers concentrates on the activism of middle- and upper-class women. In contrast, Kaplan is interested in centering the community activism of working class and poor women who operate from the grassroots rather than in centralized political or social organizations. She notes that the term grassroots "suggests being outside the control of any state, church, union, or political party" (p. 2). Kaplan's work further demonstrates how "women of different racial-ethnic and class backgrounds claim social and political citizenship in arenas 'outside the realm of governmental politics'" (Nelson 1984, p. 209). Rather than view these spheres of citizenship as separable arenas of struggle, the community activists Kaplan studied "understood that full participation for working-class and poor people of different racial-ethnic backgrounds requires access to certain basic social and economic protections" (Naples 1998c, in press). In describing their view of social citizenship, Kaplan draws on the political wisdom of South African activists Regina Ntongana and Josette Cole. For Ntongana and Cole, "social citizenship ... include[s] the rights of everyone to schools, jobs, health care, and housing" (p. 14). However, Kaplan points out, this form of "justice has never been codified in national or international law" (p. 14). She points that, "By creating a third space that is neither public nor private, grassroots activists have opened up an arena in which human dignity, not national law or custom, prevails" (p. 11).

Clearly Kaplan has great admiration for the women she writes about. She tells their stories with much enthusiasm. She also views the organizations they developed as more than simple sites through which specific issues can be addressed. They are described as providing models for participatory democratic practice. For example, as a result of her struggle in Love Canal, Lois Gibbs helped establish the Citizens Clearinghouse For Hazardous Waste. According to Kaplan, Gibbs and Luella Kenny, another Love Canal activist who is a board member of the Clearinghouse and director of the Love Canal Medical Trust fund which disburses funds from the financial settlement made

with Love Canal homeowners, are committed to supporting the work of community-based activists like Dollie Burwell. Rather than establishing another centralized organization with experts who are sent out to advise different communities, the Clearinghouse revised their strategies in 1995 to fund the efforts of local residents "who are clearly rooted in their own communities" (p. 99). In a similar vein, Ntongana and her co-workers at the Surplus Peoples Project in South Africa "provide training to women who have seized the initiative in their own struggles to achieve self-determination and decent housing" (p. 162).

Kaplan is also interested in understanding to what extent women community activists view their politics through a feminist lens. Kaplan (1982) employs the term "female consciousness" to describe women who make political claims on the basis of their gender roles and subsequently participate in radical political action. Not all women who make claims through their gender ideology do so on behalf of women's-specific issues like equal rights or reproductive choice. In the concluding chapter of *Crazy for Democracy*, Kaplan points out how she and Maxine Molyneux mistakenly have been criticized "for implying that women were preoccupied with private rather than public matters" (p. 219). In trying to understand the different ways women define political issues, Molyneux (1986) differentiates between "practical gender issues" and "strategic gender issues" to capture the way women activists organize around their practical everyday needs for food, housing, day care, versus organizing around their gender-specific identities. Obviously, this distinction often breaks down in practice as Kaplan herself notes. However, she also points out that she and Molyneux "were in fact arguing that the working-class women we were studying would not accept any distinction between needs and the political authority to fulfill them" (p. 219). She stresses that "Molyneux and I were concerned with consciousness and democratic priorities in movements for social change; we never accepted the idea of separate spheres" (p. 219). In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, "another key contribution of the scholarship on women's community activism involves challenging limited constructions of feminism that derive solely from white middle class women's experiences" (Naples 1998a, p. 4).

Yet, Kaplan argues, since these women do not construct their activism primarily as feminists, they can play with gender stereotypes in a way that those who center their identities as feminists may not. For example, in their efforts to confront corporate and government officials, Lois Gibbs and the other women involved in protesting the environmental dangers of Love Canal permitted themselves to be depicted as comedic figures and as victims, two modes of display that self-defined feminists would resist. Kaplan explains, "Had the women been feminists, they could have undercut their demands to be treated as full citizens by such actions. But the homeowners were desperate to save their community from disaster; they were willing to compromise their own dignity to survive" (p. 30). Kaplan further notes that the fact that these women did not define themselves as feminists, however, does not mean that they did not recognize sexism in the organizations and movements in which they participated. For example, the Surplus People Project employs a "gender facilitator" to help staff "recognize the importance of gender equality to all the work the organization does: helping create democracy in South Africa" (p. 163).

Kaplan also demonstrates the influence of other social movements in shaping the activists' political analyses and political networks. Dollie Burwell and her daughter Kim drew on lessons from the U.S. civil rights movement. Regina Ntongana and Josette Cole tied their activism to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. In fact, Kaplan writes, "Women like Regina Ntongana, by their struggle to establish homes in the cities, helped undermine apartheid and contributed to the view that housing has some relationship to so-

cial justice" (p. 128). For the Burwells, the civil rights movement provided a ready-made political community in which to mobilize against environmental racism. Dollie Burwell believes that the link made between "environmental issues and civil rights" became news and therefore brought their fight to the attention of the national media (p. 61).

Women who participate in community-based struggles especially in racist and authoritarian contexts expose themselves to physical threat, arrest, and other risks to their safety and well-being. Burwell was arrested for protesting against toxic waste in her community of Warren County, North Carolina. Ntongana's life was threatened on a number of occasions. Working class women's entre into the public sphere also challenged the gender division of labor and gendered ideologies within their families. Marriages did not always survive such redefinition of roles as Gibbs' experience attests. Activist mothers often felt torn between the demands of parenting and the hours required to mount an effective campaign against injustice (also see Naples 1998b). As Kaplan explains, "Guilt about not being home, stress over taking on extensive community work in addition to their many tasks as homemakers, and worry over the harm pollution has already done to their families cause personal pain" (p. 41). Yet these women also became empowered by their efforts to fight against toxic waste, environmental racism, and other oppressions. As in the case of the community workers I studied, the women activists in Kaplan's book often gained strength from their religious beliefs as well as from other women activists.

Another theme in *Crazy for Democracy* is how these women modeled a political commitment for their children. This is demonstrated most directly in Kaplan's interviews with Kim Burwell. While I disagree with Kaplan's comment that "No woman is a hero to her daughter" (p. 110), I have also noted significant generational variation in political practice (Naples 1998b). For example, the church did not offer as significant a site for Kim Burwell's activism as it provided her mother. However, both women recognized the key contributions that women make to the survival of communities of color. These "community othermothers" may not view themselves as political leaders, but they know "everything that goes on and, without [them], nothing will happen in town" (p. 119). In South Africa, "Collective self-reliance under a crisis situation forged the women into a group that trusted its own judgment" (p. 135) and provided the basis from which to organize against attempts to destroy their housing settlement outside Cape Town. Kaplan gains hope for a more equitable democratic future from their political practice. She writes, "The fact that ordinary women were able to create a sense of community identity and wring a sense of justice out of a social system that sought to bury them alive reveals certain new possibilities for democracy. In their struggles for urban housing, they helped establish new criteria for justice, standards that combined democracy with social need" (p. 156). Regina Ntongana, Josette Cole, Dollie and Kim Burwell, Lois Gibbs, and Luella Kenny are but six of the hundreds of thousands of women engaged in community-based struggles for social justice around the world today. We all can draw inspiration from their ongoing commitment to democratic practice, gender equality, and social citizenship.

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