

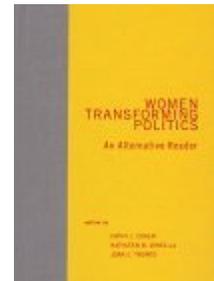
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Cathy Cohen, Kathleen Jones, Joan Tronto, eds. *Women Transforming Politics: An Alternative Reader*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1997. x + 602 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-1558-1; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1557-4.

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## Refocusing Politics

This interdisciplinary collection of essays on women and politics, aimed at classroom use, has ambitious goals. The editors want to show how research in women's and ethnic studies have transformed the framework of political science, broadening our conception of "politics" beyond the ordinary concerns of voting, lobbying, and lawmaking to include not only grassroots community activism and different definitions of leadership, but also cultural images and ethnic solidarity. They are also concerned with "decentering the focus on elite women, especially elite white women, which has continued to dominate research." Rather than treating women of color and working-class women "as deviating from a political norm established by elite white women," this collection places these women at the center of analysis (pp. 4-5). By being more inclusive about what actions count as political and about what actors participate in politics, the editors want to encourage readers to rethink the field of political science. Finally, they hope that this redefinition of the study of politics will inspire readers to help bring about the transformation of politics itself.

The collection casts a wide net: it contains thirty-three articles (thirteen of which have appeared elsewhere), representing different methodological approaches, disciplines, and concerns. Careful scholarly analyses are followed by calls to action written by activists as well as academics. It is impossible in a review to do justice to the wide scope of this collection, but I would like to call attention to several themes which run through the collection.

One of the most striking themes running through several of these essays is their attention to the politics of women's bodies, certainly not a focus of mainstream political science. Rachel Roth argues that fetal protection policies in the workplace, such as the *Johnson Controls* case, force women workers to shoulder the burden of protecting potential fetuses, rather than compelling employers to provide healthy working conditions. She places these policies alongside the prosecution of pregnant women who take drugs or drink alcohol in order to argue that public policy treats women as "merely vehicles for the interests of others" (p. 102). Suzanne Shende takes up the issue of attacks on the reproductive freedom of low-income women and women of color by focusing on the targeting of pregnant Medicaid patients for drug testing and the coercive use of Norplant. Kimberle Crenshaw formulates a Black feminist response to the violence against Black women's bodies in the music of 2 Live Crew, while suggesting that the prosecution of the rap group for obscenity was not motivated by real concern for the integrity of Black women, but rather by fear that Black male misogyny would turn on white women. She argues effectively that women of color are represented in film as especially legitimate targets for violence, and that these women's experiences of rape and violence are often disregarded on all sides. Hazel Carby takes the question of controlling Black women's bodies back to the 1920s, carrying out a detailed analysis of the desire of middle-class Blacks and whites to control the sexual behavior of Black women migrants in northern cities. Carby argues that Black reformer Jane Edna Hunter exercised

“matriarchal power” by protecting young Black women from their sexuality, and analyzes the representation of Black women’s sexuality in texts by novelists, sociologists, and entertainers like Josephine Baker and Ethel Waters. Sarah Banet-Weiser also takes up the question of how much control black women have over their sexuality in her discussion of the “troubled reign” of Vanessa Williams as Miss America. Finally, in the closing essay of the collection, Rosalind Petchesky writes about an international feminist research project that interviewed low-income women in Egypt, Brazil, Mexico, Malaysia, the Philippines, Nigeria, and the United States and discovered that these women felt entitled to some power over their reproductive and sexual lives. Given the strong theme of women’s lack of control over their bodies and sexuality that runs throughout the volume, it seems fitting to close it with Petchesky’s argument that “bodily integrity...is not just an individual but a social right, since without it women cannot function as responsible community members” (p. 582).

Another theme that ties several of the essays together is the focus on modes of organizing that low-income women and women of color are employing. Peter Kwong’s essay on sweatshop workers in New York’s Chinatown documents that Chinese women workers there are far from passive. Although they rallied quickly when the union asked them to protest a contract negotiation in 1982, the union has been uncomfortable about giving them more power. In fact, the workers ended up organizing a women’s caucus within the union in order to press for their demands, especially day care. The story of these women’s experiences links directly to another essay, illustrating community activist Rinku Sen’s argument that we need to “genderize” the movement for racial and economic justice, building on the power of women’s leadership, “giving explicit attention to the different experiences of men and women in the world and in the organization, deepening their gender analysis, and equipping them to take action” (p. 322). Gender analysis causes community organizers to ask different kinds of questions (how do mass transit fare hikes affect women and men differently? how does the sexual division of labor within the health care industry affect the quality of care? what kind of harassment by police do women experience? ), and to come up with new organizing forms. For instance, AFL-CIO unions have often been unwelcoming to women of color, so organizers in Rhode Island decided that a cooperative of day care workers would be more effective (pp. 315-17). Another case of creative organizing is the subject of Eva Weinbaum’s article: she writes

about the efforts of women in East Tennessee who had lost their jobs due to plant closings and organized into Citizens Against Temporary Services (CATS), addressing vital issues about temporary and contingent workers, local economic development policies, and the exploitation of Mexican *maquiladora* workers.

A third theme of *Women Transforming Politics* is that putting the activism of working-class women and women of color at the center requires revising standard paradigms of citizenship and politics, as well as organizing. For instance, Rina Benmayor and Rosa Torruellas suggest the term “cultural citizenship” to reflect the ways in which Latinos speak about rights: undocumented immigrants are not social parasites, but contributors to the public good, and therefore deserve health and welfare services linked to formal citizenship. Similarly, bilingual education should be preserved not only as a cultural right, but because cultural diversity enriches the fabric of the society. Cultural citizenship, “based on a broad notion of human citizenship and rights,” offers a new way to think about the notion of rights (p. 189). A revision of ideas about politics is also suggested by two different articles on Latinas’ political thinking. These articles bring out Latinas’ vision of politics as a way to carry out an “ethic of care,” giving, and helping. These women became politicized by making connections between the allegedly different spheres of their lives (family, home, and formal politics), and carry out a broader, more participatory and community-based politics, bridging electoral politics and community/grassroots activism.

Yvette Alex-Assensoh and Karin Stanford also revise conventional wisdom, noting that black women do not fit the “typical” pattern of lagging behind men in political activity. Indeed, black women are *more* involved in politics than are black men. Although black men and women in the urban underclass have similar attitudes about the political system, black women translate those attitudes into political participation much more than do black men. The authors argue that women’s greater involvement in organizations and church activities helps explain this difference, suggest that “women of the urban underclass may not be as alienated from society as if often stated” (p. 409), and remind us that we cannot draw generalizations about women and politics only from white women. That lesson is reinforced by Elsa Barkley Brown’s essay on black men and women’s politics in nineteenth-century Richmond, which provides a dramatic challenge to the idea that women have historically been excluded from formal politics. In one of the richest essays in this collection, Brown argues that im-

mediately after the Civil War, the black community of Richmond constructed a highly democratic and inclusive political life, centered around the church. The fact that black women did not have the right to vote seemed irrelevant in practice, as they attended state political conventions along with their men and their children, assuming an equal right to participate as if they were delegates. Women continued to participate in political meetings in large numbers and go to the polls on election day, viewing their men's vote as equally theirs, a collective rather than an individual possession. Women even marched in their own militia company, as if to say that no public ceremony was strictly a male domain. By the late nineteenth century, however, a narrower and more exclusive notion of politics had taken hold, reflecting increasing divisions within the black community along lines of class and gender. This essay makes the important point that black women's political activity began before the formation of black women's clubs in the 1890s, and reminds us again that black women's experience of politics in the past has been radically different from that of white women.

The final common theme I saw in the collection is the call for new understandings of feminism. Alice Echols' article places the women's liberation movement firmly within its context of other protest movements of the 1960s, arguing that the movement's commitment to egalitarianism and participatory democracy, its determination to create alternative institutions, its rejection of reform, and its tendency to subordinate politics to lifestyle were all paradigmatic of other 1960s movements. Along with these other movements, the women's liberation movement challenged conventional politics by democratizing it and by making the personal political. Other articles call for a feminism which addresses the relationship between sexism and other forms of oppression. The authors of "Smashing Icons: Disabled Women and the Disability and Women's Movements" call for closer ties between the women's movement and the disability movement, drawing on the parallels between the "icons" of the beauty pageant queen and the handicapped child featured on fundraising telethons. Sonia Shah calls for a "bicultural feminism" which addresses the cultural duality and cultural discrimination with which Asian American women struggle, and suggests this kind of feminism, moving outside the black/white dichotomy of race relations, can contribute to a broader movement as well. Finally, Kimberle Crenshaw's discussion of Black feminism and 2 Live Crew makes a compelling case for the need for a feminism which can analyze the ways in which race and

gender subordination intersect, and respond accordingly.

Overall, this is a valuable and thought-provoking collection of essays which many will find useful in teaching courses about women and politics (it has clearly been priced for course adoption, at \$22.95). Its broad scope will challenge students and teachers to expand the boundaries of what they consider to be politics, and its focus on women of color and working-class women is a welcome departure from the norm. Historians will probably want to look elsewhere for books for their courses on women and politics, although they will be interested in several of the articles included here. The essays in the collection are of uneven quality, are organized in an unclear fashion, and some (though by no means all) of the strongest ones are reprinted from elsewhere. But the editors have performed a service by bringing these essays together, and encouraging their readers to broaden their definition of politics.

One weakness of this collection deserves special comment: the volume contains no work on conservative or right-wing women's politics, and barely mentions women whose political action is not thought to be "transformative" or worthy of emulation. Hazel Carby's discussion of Jane Edna Hunter's desire to control the sexual behavior of young migrant women is the only point in this six hundred-page book when tensions *among* women of color are brought out. Scholars have been paying attention to conservative women's politics in recent years,[1] and surely a mature study of women and politics must acknowledge the diversity of women's political allegiances and actions—even as it calls for more attention to the diversity among women.

#### Note

[1]. For instance, see Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); Elna Green, *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Glen Jeansonne, *Mothers of the Far Right: The Mothers' Movement and World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996).

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