

H-Net Reviews

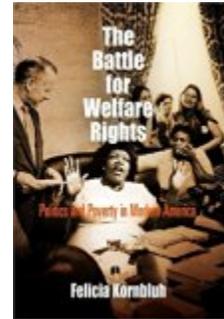
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Felicia Kornbluh. *The Battle for Welfare Rights Moment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 288 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4005-4.

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Gender, American Politics, and Welfare Rights

In *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America*, Felicia Kornbluh provides a fascinating detailed case study of the rise and decline of the welfare rights movement in New York City during the 1960s and 1970s. Kornbluh argues that the welfare rights movement and thus issues of gender and sexuality are central to the history of American liberalism. By demonstrating the importance of gender and sexuality to the rise and decline American liberalism, Kornbluh places these issues at the center of American history. In addition to placing her work in dialogue with American political history, Kornbluh demonstrates that activists used public policy and the law as tools for social change and asserts that scholars have created an artificial distinction between the histories of the law, public policy, and grassroots social movements. Kornbluh also integrates the national and local scales in her book. She focuses on New York City as an important case study in the welfare rights movement, but still highlights important national moments for the movement such as Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign. To do this, Kornbluh uses the remarkable story of Beulah Sanders throughout the book. Sanders was an African American woman welfare recipient who became a movement leader, first in the local New York movement and then in the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). At the height of the influence of the welfare rights movement, she even served as acting secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare for the federal government.

Kornbluh's research on the welfare rights movement

raises a number of important questions that scholars should address in further studies of both this movement and grassroots social movements in general. The relationship between the welfare rights movement and feminist movement is one key issue that Kornbluh only briefly discusses, but is ripe for further research. Kornbluh notes that welfare rights activists realized that racial, class, and gender hierarchies pushed middle-class white women into the home, but forced Latino and African American women to enter low-paid jobs in the workforce, devaluing African American and Latino women's work as mothers. At the same time that welfare rights activists demanded the right to be paid for their work as mothers, white middle-class feminists asserted their right to obtain well-paid professional positions and compete on an equal level with white men in the workforce. Although Kornbluh does not interrogate the inherent tension between these positions, the low-paid labor of many Latino women as nannies and housekeepers in white upper- and middle-class homes facilitated the entrance of upper-middle class white women into the paid workforce. A fundamental tension existed between these two movements that deserves further study.

Another interesting avenue for further research is the relationship between welfare rights activists such as Sanders and the labor feminists Dorothy Sue Cobble discusses in her recent book, *The Other Women's Movement* (2004). Like welfare rights activists, labor feminists demanded recognition of their work as mothers and special rights in the workforce that would allow them to raise

their children. Women and gender historians need to continue to grapple with these different strains of feminism and the high value working-class and poor women place on their labor as mothers.

One final area for additional study is the role of Latino women and the relationship between Latino and African American women in the welfare rights movement. Kornbluh notes that Latinos were members of the NWRO, but their voices seldom appear in her book. African American women such as Sanders and sympathetic white liberals who were primarily male appear to have seized leadership in the organization. Did Latino women also emerge as leaders? Kornbluh's reliance on the records of the NWRO and other local governmental and organizational records likely is one reason Latino voices seldom

appear. Utilizing oral histories might provide a window into Latino women's activism and help scholars analyze any racial and economic hierarchies within the NWRO.

Finally, because of Kornbluh's focus on New York City, more research is needed to understand how typical the New York movement was. Did this movement also flourish outside urban centers, in smaller cities, and in communities with different racial compositions? Kornbluh's book convincingly argues for the centrality of issues of sex and gender to American political history in her book and unearths a fascinating story of African American women's demand for economic rights as citizens of America. Her book also opens new avenues and raises important questions for women and gender scholars and political historians to explore.

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