

**Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles.** *Karen Brodtkin*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007. 219 pp.

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Social movements are seen as a way to revive democratic participation and catalyze change in an age when institutions increasingly escape the boundaries of established constituencies. Karen Brodtkin, in *Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles*, introduces us to a new generation of social movement activists nurtured in Los Angeles, committed to organizing immigrant workers and other “working-class people of color.” Brodtkin’s book is centered on the stories of 16 “narrators” and their journeys toward political consciousness and activism, including experience for 11 of them employed as professional organizers with service workers’ unions like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and UNITE HERE.

We are introduced to people like Milton Pascual, who spent his first years in El Salvador until his family could coyote him to Los Angeles. He was raised in the union, coming to organizing from a family deeply involved with a HERE local where he voluntarily spent his free time while in high school: unionism and his ethnicity were the cultural heritage behind his activism. Quynh Nguyen, whose Vietnamese language skills and family’s refugee experience have proved invaluable as an organizer, emigrated from Vietnam to Montreal where her first English words were “boat people” flung toward her as an insult. Brodtkin suggest that experiences like these, of being the target of “othering” and encounters with the “powers of

institutionalized whiteness,” have galvanized her narrators toward activism; but other women among her narrators crossed borders in the other direction, finding the experiences of escaping privilege and involvement by joining the activist community liberating in themselves.

Many readers of *American Ethnologist* participated, willingly or not, in the actions of those chronicled here: the 2005 AAA meetings in San Francisco were cancelled in support of a hotel workers’ strike that was, in the end, successful. Brodtkin’s narrators are mostly from what has been called the new union movement (in contrast with unions of the industrial and rust belt working class). This introduces an emphasis on organizing largely left aside by the old guard like the United Auto Workers (with whom I have worked): organizing is moot when the ranks are being downsized and too few jobs to go around is the problem. This newer approach has enjoyed much success, in good part by focusing on firms providing services that cannot be outsourced: if I live in Ciudad Juarez, I cannot very well make your bed at a hotel in Los Angeles.

Brodtkin’s subjects, many from immigrant families themselves, could be seen as vanguards of this new direction in union organizing. Their experience of the growing grassroots immigrant and workers’ rights campaigns which emerged in the 1990s, like Justice for Janitors, were the wellspring of their current activities. Brodtkin stresses how the political and the personal come together for these activists, as they did for her and her generation during the 1960s, to form an “organizing tradition” seeking to educate and spread the tools of leadership. The creation of energy in communities invigorated by shared understandings of “who we are” generates “new political subjectivities” that motivate the activists and are encouraged in the membership. The majority of the narrators were drawn to activism, and transformed into activists, during their college years (many with Brodtkin at UCLA), where their personal experiences and that of their families as Asian and Latino immigrants were foundational. In many ways, Brodtkin’s book is

about how these young college educated activists came to hear and respond to the activist calling, and the promise held in their activities.

Brodkin connects the old and new union movements exclusively in terms of what the new corrects about the old. She pays less attention to the connections or parallels between her narrators and the union movement before the 1990s. For example, a reader would think the inclusion of people of color and women in the union movement's leadership is a relatively new thing. But unionism has a long—albeit inconsistent—history of involvement in these issues, such as the critical support unions like the United Auto Workers (UAW) provided at the birth of the civil rights movement (see Dillard 2007). The UAW local I worked with elected an African American president in the 1950s when the factory was populated by a diaspora of first- and second-generation African American and white immigrants from the south.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the old guard union movement turned toward issues of alienation and control in the workplace. In the back and forth between the quest for civil rights and unions, Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) in Detroit, led by African American workers, was after increased representation in the leadership but also pursued broader rights to self-determination in the workplace for all, putting them in conflict with managerialism. Combating managerialism was where the old unionism was turning when it was shut down and sent reeling by the neoliberal and monetarist structural adjustments to America's unionized workforce begun in the late 1970's (see Mike Davis 2000).

Brodkin notices that her “college-educated recruiters identify with ethnic-cultural communities that are working class, while the two rank-and-file organizers identify as working class across ethnicity and race” (p. 125). Might the politics of identity and the workplace-based politics of unions be in conflict here? If the class divide in the United States today is about the

power you have in the workplace (Zweig 2000), then these activists may be missing an important connection with those they hope to represent. Those with college training in leading and organizing usually miss shared experience of the labor process: the everyday eight hours or more experiences of those they hope to represent. Experience of that workplace as a worker is a critical part of the local relationships Brodtkin stresses are the roots out of which social movements grow. Some of the new unions have been charged with being undemocratic for appointing leaders rather than electing them out of the ranks; in San Francisco, among other places, an opposition movement is growing against this aspect of how the SEIU is organized.

One promise these young activists do seem poised to fulfill is the need for border crossings in the union movement, people capable of translating and mediating among the various isolated union movements around the globe. Fulfilling this task would bring such activists close to the traditional concerns of anthropology, and I hope anthropologists hear more from activists like these as the union movement goes transnational.

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