

BOOK REVIEW

***Gendering Radicalism:
Women and Communism
in Twentieth-Century California***

Beth Slutsky. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015.
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IN *GENDERING RADICALISM*, Beth Slutsky produces an important portrait of radical political organizing in twentieth-century America through the stories of three women who served in successive leadership positions for the Communist party in California from 1919 through 1992: Charlotte Anita Whitney, Dorothy Ray Healey, and Kendra Claire Harris Alexander. Working and organizing within different but overlapping epochs of radical reform movements in America—the Bolshevik Revolution (Whitney), the U.S. labor movement (Healey), and the Cold War and Civil Rights Movement (Alexander)—their stories reflect the morphology of the Communist Party as it wrestled with defining debates over race, gender, and class in America. To that end, this book also reflects the unique contributions of each of these women to the Party, and the inevitable tensions around the position of women in the Party. Finally, this book explores the role of California in centering and shaping the character of politics in America. For its tolerance toward more radical political philosophies, California then and now stirred the winds to pull American politics leftward. In this regard, this story of three women in California is not one that unfolds in isolation to other lives involved in and touched by the Communist Party across America. Whitney, Healey, and Alexander’s political visions, while mediated in the American West, were ultimately informed by and expressed a shared *American* experience of economic disenfranchisement, racism, and sexism.

The book is comprised of five chapters. In Chapter 1, Slutsky introduces the book’s guiding questions, including “How did the Party change over time because of and for its female members?” “To what extent did its members’ race and class shape the Party’s changing agenda?” and “How and why was California central in their experiences with radicalism?” (3). These questions

reflect perhaps the book's most compelling contributions: its exploration of how the female experience, intersecting with race and class, stretched the Party's vision and efficacy over time. Following Chapter 1 are three chapters, each devoted to the professional and personal biographies of Whitney, Healey, and Alexander, and a concluding chapter that provides a comparative discussion of the shared ideals, beliefs, contradictions, and experiences of their collective political careers.

While historical context, economic and racial background, and entrance and exit points of Party membership among the three women described in *Gendering Radicalism* varied, there were some common motivations for joining the Communist cause. None of the women began from a philosophical place; rather, they found the Party through grassroots activism (192) that was situated in personal encounters with structural racial and economic inequalities growing up.

Charlotte Anita Whitney's legacy was defined by a sometimes harmonious, at other times fraught position at the intersection of class privilege and class consciousness. As a woman of wealth and connection, Whitney had an influence on the Communist Party in the 1920s that drew, in part, on the political mobility afforded her by class privilege and family status. An early suffragist, her political life steered increasingly toward more radical philosophies that called for deep overhauls of the American political system. She managed to maintain friendships among established liberal elites, finding common ground on social issues and drawing on these connections when encountering the justice system. Whitney's landmark political moment came in 1920 when she was accused of supporting the violent overthrow of the U.S. government for her membership in the Communist Labor Party in California, charges that were ultimately dropped, years later. Her experiences in and out of the court system provided a storyline for the Communist Party, and she was branded the "Western matriarch" of radicalism in the U.S. (23), a title that at the time was best served by a woman with political clout and economic means. Indeed, Whitney's story demonstrates that women's entrance into the folds of Party leadership early on was determined largely by class.

Dorothy Ray Healey's involvement in the Communist Party centered more directly on the voices of the working class. Healey worked within the most successful, and perhaps most visible, era of communist organizing, one that was fueled by collective economic anxieties around the Great Depression. Healey was most active in mid-century labor movements, particularly among

workers in the agricultural and production industries in California. Her relationship with food industry workers, particularly female, was long. She oversaw one of the largest female unions in the country and tackled issues of gender and race in much deeper ways than the previous generation of female activists. Still, Slutsky notes, in line with many "protofeminist Communists" of the time, she expressed hesitation and even disdain at any kind of special "privileging" of her gender (89). Her relationship with the Communist Party in America shifted in 1956 at the revelation of the atrocities committed under Stalin's leadership. While membership in the Party across the U.S., and notably in California, declined with evidence of widespread and systematic abuses of Soviet power, Healey held on to aspirations of Party reform much longer, until ultimately defecting to the New American Movement in 1975.

Kendra Harris Alexander, active from 1966 until 1992, represents most directly the influence of a second wave of feminism that recognized the different raced and classed experiences of women. She was active in the civil rights movement early on, coordinating Selma's sister protest and follow-up protest in Los Angeles in 1965. She spent summers in the South working on civil rights, observing a kind of structural poverty and racism that did not exist in California. These experiences "taught her about the Intractability of poverty and the value of a broader class-based approach to confront racial inequalities" (142), lessons that laid the foundations for her entrance into the Communist Party. It was a time when civil rights activists were torn over what lay at the heart of racial inequality: race or class. Alexander found her answers in the Old Left and the theoretical work of Marx and Lenin, and funneled her frustrations into work on racial inequality in California, including housing access and affordability. Alexander served a long career and helped establish a face and voice for racial issues in the Party. She and the Party ultimately divorced in 1992 over tensions around the relevance of the Party in the post-Cold War era, and she tragically died in a fire in 1993. In spite of this sticky end and the legacies of Soviet oppression abroad that continued to plague the reputation of the Party, Alexander's storied career pushed American Communism to work more deeply at the intersection of race, class, and gender.

A common adage of feminist scholarship is that the "personal is political." *Gendering Radicalism* focuses on the personal histories of these women as they find and modify their public political voice, with an understanding that "public" and "private" are not distinct and disconnected spheres of social life; they inform one another and are also fraught with their own internal contradictions. In Slutsky's narrative, we see the private human dimensions

of these very public figures. For example, Whitney's emotional observations of poverty in Lower East side Manhattan, Healey's mother's difficulties accessing adequate reproductive healthcare, Alexander's formative visits to the American South, and the unique marriages and parental roles of each woman that tested their public ideologies on gender roles and relations. These intimate details, including the wonderful collection of personal photos at the center of the book, describe the human experiences and relationships that formed the backbone of each woman's political aspirations. To that end, *Gendering Radicalism* is an important contribution to feminist studies. Slutsky describes how female activist communities were fostered through communal care, through health and family and financial need (192). Slutsky writes, "their families, friends, and cultural understandings centered on American notions of identity and femininity. They lived their lives deeply connected to their local communities—from community centers to women's clubs to student organizations to local politics" (7). These are women and stories that emphasize the communities of care—familial, friendly, professional, and personal—that underpin the feminist project for social change.

I highly recommend this book for anyone with a historical curiosity about radical politics in America, but especially for activists and observers of radical political culture today. Embedded in these stories are important reminders and lessons about the risks, challenges, and rewards of operating on the margins of established political and social norms. This is also an important feminist narrative of the life of the Communist Party in twentieth-century America that explores the intersectional dimensions (racial and economic) of gender in politics. Slutsky's book comes at an important time, as the structural legacies of Whitney, Healey, Alexander, and many other women's efforts to advance social equality over the past century are under assault. *Gendering Radicalism* is a testament to the courage, resilience, and unique contributions of female activists and the ever-more important work of women to push the boundaries of democracy.

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