Women and Social Protest

EDITED BY

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WOMEN AND SOCIAL PROTEST

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New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1990

For H. B., Laurie, and Paul
Guida West

For Aunt Bess
Rhoda Lois Blumberg

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Women and social protest / edited by Guida West, Rhoda Lois Blumberg.
p. cm. Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-19-506118-7. — ISBN 0-19-506517-4 (pbk.)
1. Women in politics. 2. Women's rights.
3. Social movements. 4. Feminism.
I. West, Guida. II. Blumberg, Rhoda Lois.
HQ1236.W6365 1990 305.42—dc20
89-78129

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Preface

The idea for this book had its origin in our experiences as activists, teachers, researchers, and writers about protest who were confronted with a dearth of material on women and politics. The contradiction of our lives as political women and the information available in the sociological literature sparked our desire to examine why such data were so scarce. It became clear that women's participation in social protest was an arena that begged for analysis, especially from a feminist perspective.

A workshop on women and political action at the National Women's Studies Association Conference in 1984 provided the catalyst for us to commit ourselves to this project as co-editors. At first we hoped to conduct a review of the literature and write a book that synthesized existing research. It soon became apparent that the material was so scattered that there was no way to adequately review it. Consequently, we decided to put out a "call for papers" as a means of bringing together a selection of articles on women and social protest. Establishing this as our broad core concept, we tapped the sociological and political science disciplines and networks for relevant research. The intended literature review was incorporated, selectively, into an introductory theoretical chapter.

We purposely did *not* specify a common theoretical or methodological framework in our call for papers. We hoped for diversity and we got it. Clearly, a common framework might have made for a more integrated volume. However, we both felt that setting hard-and-fast boundaries on a research topic that was in the early stages of development would be less than useful, and might even be detrimental to our better understanding of women's involvement in social protest.

Among the articles submitted, several authors focused on women's struggles for their own rights and those of other women. Other authors dealt with women's participation in a variety of movements throughout the world and in different eras. We then sought a few specific articles to strengthen and balance the manuscript, while recognizing the impossibility of being holistic or all-inclusive. Although we have referred to (in Chapter 1) such diverse protests as those of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, of black and white women in the South African anti-apartheid movement, and of Indian women in the Chipko tree movement, we have not dealt with women activists and revolutionaries in other places, such as the Philippines, Northern Ireland, the *favelas* in Brazil, Australia, the Soviet Union, or Eastern Europe.

Nor have we included articles on every important movement, such as that of abortion rights. The boundaries of our topic are still unclear, and data still need to be synthesized, as we and other feminists redefine what we mean by social protest. This volume is offered as the beginning of such an effort, in the hope that it will stimulate and challenge others. Most of the articles were written for this collection.

The book represents diversity in a number of respects. First, it includes women's participation in various types of protest at the grass-roots, national, and international levels. Second, the women involved in these protests come from various classes, races, and cultures. Third, the types of movements vary with respect to gender structure. Some include women working with men (gender integrated); some, women working independently; and some, women working in parallel with men—in separate auxiliaries or caucuses linked to groups controlled by men. Fourth, the articles span various centuries and cover different regions of the world. Finally, the authors themselves represent a spectrum of race, class, culture, gender, and sex orientation, as well as academic disciplines.

While the diversity adds to the "sampler" effect of a volume on women and social protest, common themes integrate the various articles and link them to the theoretical discussion in Chapter 1. From Blumberg's research on women in the civil rights movement and West's on women in the welfare rights movements, as well as our review of the literature, similar concerns that attracted women into the protest arena became salient. The articles could be, and were, categorized in terms of the type of protest in which the women were involved. Thus the book is organized into four parts, reflecting four types of issues that draw women into protest.

We have many people to thank who helped to make our idea a reality. First and foremost, we thank all our contributors for their cooperation, responsiveness, and loyalty. Second, we acknowledge the love and support throughout the years of our families and friends who made it possible for us to stay with it. For Rhoda Blumberg, they include, in particular, her daughters, Leah and Helena Jo; her Aunt Bess; and three very supportive friends: Miriam Goldberg, Lynda Glennon, and Annie Gandon. Blumberg thanks the Rutgers University Research Council and Douglass Fellows Opportunity Fund for financial support, and Stanford University for an appointment as visiting scholar at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender. Guida West thanks Alison Jaggar and her other colleagues in the Laurie New Jersey Women's Studies Seminar at Rutgers University for their ideas and encouragement. West especially acknowledges the invaluable support of her partner and friend of thirty-nine years, John or H. B.; her children, Laura Lea and Paul; her sister, Landa; and her special friend, Mitzi Law.

Both of us are grateful to our editor, Valerie Aubry, who gave us direction and support throughout the publishing process. We appreciatively acknowledge the artwork for the cover contributed by Ann S. Walker, director of the International Women's Tribune Center. We would also like to thank our anony-

mous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and comments, some of which have been incorporated. Of course, we assume full responsibility for the volume as a whole, asking that our readers view it as one additional contribution to the growing feminist literature on women's lives within the political realm.

Montclair, N. J. G.W.
New York R.L.B.
February 1990

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INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

Reconstructing Social Protest from a Feminist Perspective

GUIDA WEST AND
RHODA LOIS BLUMBERG

SOCIAL PROTEST AND GENDER BIAS

Television, newspapers, magazines, books, and journal articles have tended to portray politics in general and social protest in particular as an almost exclusively male domain. Women are visible mainly through their participation in feminist causes. We join other contemporary critics in questioning the accuracy of this imagery. Either women have only recently become activists, just as some have now gained elective office, or their participation in social protest has been ignored by the media as well as by scholars. If the extent of their activism in the protest arena (independently or in coalition with men) has been lost in history, as many scholars now contend, views—and stereotypes—about women in the political world must be reexamined. Concepts of what constitutes political action must be reconsidered, for inaccurate presentation of women in this or any other area is poor and misleading social science. Furthermore, how we see and describe our lives—including the arena of political protest—has consequences for these very lives. This interdisciplinary collection of historical and contemporary research has been brought together to answer the need for expansion of scientific knowledge about women and social protest.

This chapter first explores the meaning of social protest and some of the newer critical conceptualizations of what are sometimes called social move-

ments and sometimes called collective behavior. Second, the chapter examines the feminist critique of social science, particularly as it deals with politics and social protest. We then discuss some general propositions that emerge out of the evidence in this volume, the existing literature on women and social protest, and our own research in this area. Four types of social protests in which women have been involved are identified and illustrated; these provide the framework for the four parts of the book. A key question that underlies this first chapter is: How must the study of social protest be reconstructed if it is to include women's lives, experiences, feelings, and visions? That is, what do we learn when the analysis of social protest is women-centered?

We proceed with the following assumptions:

1. Throughout the ages and cross-culturally, women of different classes and races have acted on their felt concerns whenever and however they were able (that is, they have been actors—not passive bystanders—in social protest).
2. Women's participation in collective actions to bring about or resist change throughout history has been expressed in rational attempts to achieve desired ends.
3. Social protest is a form of politics which occurs more commonly than conventional wisdom suggests.
4. Social protest cuts across gender lines as well as race, class, age, and other stratification determinants.

However, resources and opportunities available to women (and men) vary over time and place, reflecting shifts in the political conditions under which they organize and resist. Established gender-related legal codes, religious doctrines, and cultural ideologies have greatly affected women's ability to enter and stay in the protest arena. These factors tend to establish the accepted definitions of what constitutes politics, who is political, and what the rewards and punishments are for being political, based on gender as well as race and class. They determine "appropriate" boundaries of political behavior for women and for men. Whereas men in most cultures have been taught to be aggressive and openly political in social interactions, including the protest arena, women have not. Historically, when men revolt, their behavior still falls within, rather than violates, masculine cultural norms—whether the action succeeds or fails. In contrast, women across cultures and throughout the ages have generally been socialized to be "apolitical" and have often been punished for ignoring gender boundaries when they have dared to venture into this masculine "political" sphere. We assume also (and it is becoming increasingly evident today) that the history of women and social protest has been largely ignored, misrepresented, or repressed.

In sum, politics, including protest politics, has been socially constructed, or, more accurately, male-constructed. While the contributors to this volume vary in their approaches, collectively they contribute to the multidisciplinary feminist literature that is examining and reconstructing theories about women

and their lives. In varying ways they ask what happens to theory, interpretation, and narrative when woman is integrated into the analysis (see J. Martin 1986; Schuster and Van Dyne 1985, 1988). A major aim of this chapter, then, is to contribute to the emerging women-centered analysis of social protest within political discourse and debate.

The Definition of Social Protest

The definition of "social protest"—what it includes or excludes—will vary, depending on the place, the time, and who is observing and recording the "facts." As political conditions change, so do established concepts and bodies of knowledge. Similarly, what is defined as "politics" or "political behavior" is historically linked to power conflicts and, at times, specifically to gender power struggles. Thus the degree of political gender-blindness varies over history (K. Jones 1988:20).

Until recently, politics was viewed in the Western free world as comprising primarily such formal activities as registering to vote, voting, running for office and being involved in the mainstream electoral process. This approach resulted in studies revealing that women participate less than men in "politics." These findings were then interpreted by male scholars as evidence to support the image and the theories of the "apolitical" woman (K. Jones 1988:21). With the rise of feminist research, as we discuss later, new theories emerged, such as those about socially embedded obstacles to women's political participation.

In the nineteenth century, conservative political philosophers viewed collective actions as threats to the established ruling order. Consequently, they defined such actions as crowdlike, emotional, or deviant rather than as rational behavior by people organizing to make known their grievances (Le Bon 1969). Today, most political scholars reject this narrow interpretation of group behavior (H. Becker 1963:7; Cloward and Piven 1979; Horowitz 1972:350; Piven 1976, 1980:1) and argue for theories that use availability of resources and opportunity structures to explain why, when, and how people protest and make claims (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1978; Wilson 1973; Zald and Ash 1966).[1]

Political scholars also tend to agree that social protest and social movements are political, and also that they overlap, despite differences in degree of organization, numbers of people involved, duration, degree of spontaneous actions by individuals as well as groups, and other dimensions (Gamson 1975; Lipsky 1970; Lofland 1985; Piven 1980, 1981; Piven and Cloward 1977; Useem 1975). Most now view social movements as collective organized actions to bring about or resist change by means of various historically conditioned strategies. Charles Tilly (1981:17) argues in favor of the use of the term "collective action" rather than "protest," "rebellion," or similar terms because the use of such words "prejudges the intentions and political position of actors, usually from the perspectives of the authorities." But, along with others, Tilly agrees that social movements or social protests should be seen as "an estab-

lished way of doing political business." In sum, political theorists have moved from defining social protest as irrational, deviant behavior to affirming collective mobilization by groups and individuals as a rational and political means of challenging the status quo in society.

As the definition of "political behavior" has become more inclusive and more ordinary, women and their life experiences, previously ignored, have come to be included in reconstructed theories. Thus changing political conditions both mirror and model what we understand as social protest today.

As Piven and Cloward (1977:36–37) insightfully conclude from their studies of poor people's protests in the United States, *mass* social protest is rare. One's ability to participate and one's choice of strategies and tactics are limited by the political climate, one's cultural and class location, and available resources (see Gamson 1975). Historically, for women, for the poor, and for blacks and other people of color, opportunities for asserting rights under the law have been greatly restricted by those in power.

While academics have now begun to recognize the rational and political elements in protest, many authorities and the public still tend to characterize much protest behavior as irrational, thereby legitimating greater social control of the so-called deviants. For example, when massive civil disturbances occurred in cities throughout the United States in the late 1960s, and African-Americans, students, women, and gay people organized and protested in the streets, their behavior was viewed by many as threatening, irrational, senseless, and malign (Skolnick 1969:330). Even today, public-opinion data continue to reflect the belief that women are simply not designed for the rough-and-tumble world of male politics.[2]

Nonetheless, people find ways to protest wherever they are. Throughout history, those trapped in their own neighborhoods by poverty have taken action where they live. For example, poor women, mostly black, relegated to urban ghettos in the United States, marched to demand food, clothing, and shelter and took over welfare offices in the late 1960s. The "powerless" have always tried to resist their oppressors, creatively using whatever resources they possess—their bodies, time, talents, energy, children. As one welfare rights woman observed, "We protested where we were 'planted' " (West n.d.).

Similarly, we know that African-Americans, Native Americans, and Chicana(o)s have fought in many different ways for their rights in the United States; women around the globe have fought for basic survival needs, as well as to stop violence against themselves and their children and to gain the right to be heard within the political arena (Jayawardena 1986). Indeed, protest politics is an everyday experience in the lives of people around the world, whether reflected in open confrontations—peaceful or violent—with authorities or in less evident but no less conflictual events within the polity *and* other institutions in society. However, many local protest activities are crushed or lose support before they reach the level of mass movements, while others are never recorded as part of political history. Women's protest activities in particular have often suffered this fate.

The Feminist Critique of Gender Bias in Social and Political Thought

The absence of gender analysis (except, of course, in research on the women's movement) stands out starkly in almost all academic works on social protest. Interested readers are hard-pressed to find the *mention* of women, let alone comparative analysis of men and women's roles, attitudes, and feelings as social protestors. Some researchers mention the importance of gender analysis but then justify not doing it because of its alleged complexity (Fendrich and Krauss 1978:236). Others simply do not consider gender a heuristic tool in the analysis of social protest, an assumption now challenged by new feminist research. Gender-neutral terms (such as "challengers," "dissidents," "beneficiaries," "adherents," "demonstrators," "rebels," "terrorists," and so on) mask information about who is involved—men, women or both. Similarly, use of the terms "leaders" and "organizers" in the analysis of social protest without gender specification implicitly reinforces dominant notions that men are playing these roles. Within a patriarchal context, men are assumed to be leaders and organizers in the public sphere, while women who enter it are viewed as their supporters. Furthermore, sexist language that uses generic terms such as "he," "him," "men," "chairmen," and so forth continues to reinforce the impression that men, not women, are the political activists. Thus language, along with other patriarchal institutions, shapes as well as reflects reality about women and social protest.

Several feminist scholars highlight the gender bias in political science. Bourque and Grossholtz (1974) point out how political science has tended to look at female participation as an "unnatural practice." Boals (1975) notes the scarcity of information about women in this field and the male bias inherent in its basic concepts and definitions. Jones and Jonasdottir (1988:8) highlight the "peculiar irony of modern political theory"—that as the ideals of freedom and equality are becoming universally promoted, "the specific presence of women and men in the political field is denied." Thus they find that in current discourse, "the sexless and genderless member of an organized interest group" is portrayed as the political norm. Nelson (1989:1) also documents "the gendered nature of the assumptions and traditions of political science." A feminist perspective on politics requires a definition and a theory that are women-centered, that include women's actions, desires, needs, and feelings in any and all arenas, and that explicitly identify and analyze them as an integral part of political life.

While class and race as analytic categories in protest theory may have also been neglected, they are receiving increased attention, especially with the rise of Marxist revolutions, the growing revolt by blacks in South Africa, and racial minority group protests in the United States.

Jonasdottir (1988:42) points out that recent political studies have revealed "unequivocally that the background variable of gender is one of the most, sometimes *the* most, differentiating factor in studies of political behavior." The evidence, she adds, shows that "women, to a greater *degree* than men, and in different *ways*, initiate, pursue and support issues concerning bio-social pro-

duction and reproduction, that is, those questions having to do with control over, responsibility for, and care of people and other natural resources" (Jonasdottir's italics). She notes that in Western capitalistic societies, the possibility that women and men are competing interest groups is usually not acknowledged in mainstream political science or even by many women's organizations. Paradoxically, Jonasdottir observes, as more women are organizing to protect themselves from patriarchal power and its consequences, and in reaction "men seem to be moving towards a new phase of organizing vis-a-vis women" (1988:44). Gender in social protest is emerging in theoretical debates, despite resistance, as the reality of women's historical place in protest becomes more widely recognized. In a similar vein, Hernes (1988:203) finds in her study of Sweden that gender is a critical element in the study of sources and modes of citizenship. Finally, Siim (1988:160–86) argues that as long as politics is conceptualized narrowly as participation in formal "power from above," we will continue to ignore women's involvement in social movements and protests, or what she terms "power from below."

Other general themes that emerge in the basic feminist critique of supposedly scientific literature are now familiar: women's contributions have been ignored, misrepresented, or erased from history in a patriarchal world. Men (especially those in authority) have had the power to define what knowledge is and what part of it gets transmitted from generation to generation. This fact has crucial practical and policy implications. Knowledge of women's past struggles and achievements is a political resource needed in raising consciousness and mobilizing others to dismantle patriarchal institutions.

Spender (1983c:9–12), following Dorothy Smith (1978), brilliantly shows how circles of powerful men who control the world are able to describe and order it. In the process, women are excluded from these circles in which society's meanings are constructed. By making political women "invisible," men reinforce the dualistic world-view of themselves as political and women as apolitical. Women who construct their own meanings and traditions threaten patriarchal values; they cease to be invisible and unreal, as they challenge the records that men have created.

Inclusion of women changes the assumptions and categories that men have set up. Consequently, feminists argue that any analysis of politics and social protest (like the analysis of the sciences, arts, humanities, religion, and so on) must include the actions, attitudes and subjective meanings of diverse groups of women as they organize to gain power to change (or resist change in) their lives. The actions and attitudes of men cannot be generalized to cover the entire population (see also Wittner 1984). Spender (1985:200–202) maintains that the inclusion of the experiences of other than white races requires a similar transformation.[3]

In addition, feminists assert that the personal is political and that the political is personal. From this perspective, all persons are political beings from the time they are born, and, as members of a group, are involved episodically in varying forms of protest (limited only by their resources, opportunities, and sociopolitical conditions). With this feminist reconceptualization, we can identify myriad collective events and ways in which groups generally

defined as powerless, passive victims, gain power as they mobilize and act to control their lives.

The need to transform knowledge has led feminists to *"rethink the basic conceptual and theoretical frameworks of their respective fields"* (Stacey and Thorne 1985:302).[4] The solution is not simply to graft women onto male-created models, but, as sociologists Stacey and Thorne (1985) and others (Jones and Jonasdottir 1988) suggest, to examine traditional concepts and methods of analysis that continue to focus on gender (or race or ethnicity) as only an attribute of an *individual* or a group of individuals rather than as a hierarchical system of organizing power within society. By reexamining such traditional notions and methods of analysis, feminists are making visible the impact of gender power differentials in various settings (see for example, Jaquette and Staudt's [1988] feminist analysis of U.S. population policy in the Third World).

Not only have theories of politics and protest come under increasing scrutiny, but so too have methodologies. Women from diverse groups are now urged to tell their stories and express their feelings and visions, most of which have been previously suppressed. For example, the crucial role of African-American women in starting the Montgomery bus boycott, which triggered the civil rights movement, has emerged more than thirty years after it occurred. How black women experienced this event and how they developed their strategies is only now being integrated into the protest literature (Robinson 1987). Similarly, the role of African-American women in the Marcus Garvey movement in the early twentieth century signals the growing feminist concern with racial and class inclusiveness in studying the political behavior of women (Bair n.d.).

Virginia Sapiro (1984:245–46), while focusing on electoral politics, also examines women's alleged absence from other kinds of political involvement. Scholars are now beginning to acknowledge that women participate politically in ways that are rarely recognized or documented as political behavior or social protest—for example, by engaging in action through churches, clubs, and other organizations—a theme to which we return later in the chapter. In addition to the women's suffrage and liberation movements, large numbers of women were involved in most of the social movements in America such as abolition, temperance, health reform, peace, progressivism and municipal reform, and civil rights. Traditionally oriented women defined these activities as an extension of their nurturing and caring in the home. An interesting case is that of the "Club Movement" of the late nineteenth century, which, according to Sapiro, was "instrumental in establishing the early framework for public social welfare programs through their work in health, education, poverty relief, and municipal reform" (1984:246). White women's clubs lobbied extensively, pushing local and state governments to accept public responsibility for social welfare. Similarly, the national club movement of black women that emerged in the late nineteenth century created new resources and opportunities for a variety of collective actions to improve the lives of black people in the United States (Giddings 1984; Griffin 1988; J. Jones 1985) .

Women have also emerged as political protestors out of their historic ties with religious institutions and beliefs. Religious convictions have propelled