



Themed Book Review on Gender and Conservatism

Tea Party Women: Mama Grizzlies, Grassroots Leaders, and the Changing Face of the American Right. By Melissa Deckman. New York: New York University Press, 2016. 385 pp. \$95.00 (hardcover), \$35.00 (paperback).

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My American Politics final-year course is subtitled “Why Do They Do That?” It is the question most asked by my British students, colleagues, neighbors, and general observers of U.S. politics — even more so since the last election. I grew up in the Texas Panhandle and have spent most of my academic career writing about the impact of the politics of the right on lives of those at the margins, but I also try to interpret for those at the margins why large numbers of social conservatives regularly vote against their own interests. What many Republicans understand to be “their interests” are very different from what many American Democrats, or European social democrats, might define as “their interests.” The subtitle of the course thus recognizes growing political polarization and the lack of — or unwillingness to find — conduits of communication. Academic research, communicated and taught well, has the potential to bridge that gap. In *Tea Party Women*, Melissa Deckman provides solid evidence to help us understand the “why,” and because of that it should become a staple of American political science and gender courses.

Specifically, Deckman asks “why Tea Party women have emerged as leaders of this newest incarnation of conservative activism in ways that are

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unprecedented in American history, and what their emergence may mean for American politics” (3). Through participant observation, elite interviews, and analysis of texts produced by the Tea Party, Deckman offers the most comprehensive picture yet of the women inside this populist conservative movement. Her account provides an interesting answer to the “why” question I pose in my class.

First, according to Deckman, the “fluid,” “decentralized structure” of the movement “allows women an unprecedented opportunity to engage in conservative activism on their own terms” (3). The supporting evidence is found in Deckman’s detailed account of Tea Party leaders such as Jenny Beth Martin, Diane Riemer, and Keli Carender of the Tea Party Patriots; Tami Nantz of Smart Girl Politics; Lori Parker of As a Mom... a Sisterhood of Mommy Patriots; and leaders of more familiar organizations such as Concerned Women for America, Eagle Forum, and the Leadership Institute. She maps the rise and strategies of each group, as well as their various collaborations. Importantly, she argues that this fluidity of political activism, which followed the election of President Barack Obama, opened up new space for conservative women to emerge in leadership positions. These women are educated, with high levels of work experience, skills, confidence, and they are motivated to be engaged political activists: “a true political elite” (34). Deckman points out that they believe the Republican Party operates an old boys’ network that until now has blocked their political participation, or more importantly, their leadership.

Second, Deckman reports that Tea Party women believe themselves to be true feminists. Where liberal or radical feminists look to the state for protection, Tea Party women argue that traditional suffragette-styled feminism was about asserting the independence and power of women to determine their own paths, to protect their families and to provide a moral compass for their communities and for the nation. Deckman explains that Tea Party women make a “deliberate connection between the right to bear arms and the potential need to protect their children” (18). In what she labels the “motherhood frame,” Deckman finds this “new civic motherhood” of the “Mama Grizzly” to be based on a fiscal claim of “kitchen table” conservatism that sees the growing deficit as “generational theft” (98–99). While noting their ambivalence regarding the term “feminism,” Deckman observes that some adopt “Ayn Rand’s school of individualism,” while others, “freedom feminists,” recognize discrimination against women but simultaneously hold that women are naturally better suited for caring roles or “civic motherhood” (98).

Undoubtedly, Deckman's detailed and sustained analysis of women in the Tea Party is a fascinating insight into a rising voice in American politics. Interestingly, Deckman contextualizes Tea Party women in opposition to the more traditional conservative women-led groups such as the Eagle Forum. However, there seems to be a more definitive genealogical connection between these groups. First, as Deckman points out, 90% of Tea Party women are white and almost 70% believe themselves to be "born again." Many of the women in Tea Party leadership, including Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachman, cut their political teeth in Christian right activist groups. On the state and local levels, Christian right leaders and Tea Party leaders are often the same people, mobilizing largely the same constituencies. Undoubtedly, one of the most interesting developments of the Trump campaign was its endorsement by Phyllis Schlafly and subsequently most mainstream Christian right groups. Second, the fluid and decentralized nature of the grassroots Tea Party, as well as the Astroturf aspects of those such as FreedomWorks, mirror exactly the strategy of the Christian right over the last 50 years, when various organizations have served different and usually complementary functions of political strategy at the local, state, and national levels. The constituencies of these groups, as well as local and state leadership, are often the same folks. It is the repetitive reiteration and rehearsal of oppositional politics by seemingly independent organizations that keeps the reserve army of political activists battle ready.

Of course, it is impossible to develop all possible frames of analysis in one monograph, but in the future I would like to see Deckman address the geographic aspect in more detail, as much of her work draws on the perspectives of Tea Party women from the East Coast. The image of the "Mama Grizzly" invoked and embodied by Sarah Palin mirrors a uniquely American iconography of the woman pioneer. I suspect the appeal of the Tea Party for many women in the South and West of the United States reflects not only their Christian morality but also their understanding of the power women have to protect their families. This ideal of womanhood resonates with the Tea Party's vision of the American spirit: a physically strong, gun-toting Annie Oakley who is fiscally conservative and morally stalwart. What Deckman aptly points out is that although the Tea Party has offered these women the possibility of stretching their political leadership muscles, the structural political power remains with the old boys of the GOP. The endless men-only shots of Trump and his advisors reinforces the need for women to

stay in the private, local, political movement and leave the power of Washington to the men. The dilemma now for Tea Party women is how to stay Annie Oakley and not turn into Calamity Jane, who ends up in a dress, decorating a cabin with gingham curtains. How will the Tea Party women, especially those in the South and West, respond to the reassertion of masculine power within the GOP? Given that they dismiss liberal feminist analysis of structural oppression, they may continue to find their power, like that of Palin and Bachman, significantly limited.

Deckman's book should be read by students of politics, and it is already on my course reading list. But it is not just a solid, thorough piece of research about an important American political movement. In these times of political polarization, Deckman's work is a conduit to help us better listen to and understand the complexities of identities and the genealogies of political strategy, in order to see how "they" define "their interests."

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