

They Dare Disturb the Universe

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Kauffman, L. A. *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism*. London: Verso, 2017. 236 pages. ISBN 978-1-78478-409-6. Pbk. \$12.

In March 2018, hundreds of thousands of American students took to the streets in cities across the United States in what later came to be known as “March for Our Lives, Never Again,” the biggest demonstration for gun control in decades. These protests followed a school shooting in Florida where 17 people were killed. Since these protests were not the first to be conducted to demand tougher gun laws, we find ourselves tiptoeing about what Nathan Heller of the *New Yorker* explicitly asks: “Is protest a productive use of our political attention? Or is it just a bit of social theatre we perform to make ourselves feel virtuous, useful, and in the right?”

L. A. Kauffman’s *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism* might be one of the possible ways to respond to Heller’s question, for Kauffman provides an insight into the history of American radicalism since the early 1970s. Being a grassroots activist who spent more than thirty years engaging in radical movements as a writer, organizer, journalist, and strategist, Kauffman shares the biographical history of radical activism in the United States as an insider: the booms and the busts, the strengths and the weaknesses, the methods and the tactics of the movements that challenged the establishment in the world’s largest hegemony. Kauffman in her approach to this history relies on a highly informative, well-documented narrative that explores the interaction of various factors (race, gender, and class) that helped the shaping and reshaping of a particular form of radical activism, that is, direct action.

The title of the book, of course, was borrowed from none other than Martin Luther King, Jr. In a speech before the Golden Anniversary League, he summarized nonviolent resistance methods starting from “taking a direct action against injustice without waiting for other agencies to act” (King 65). In her introduction, Kauffman defines the term as “a huge variety of efforts to create change outside the established mechanism of the government, it’s a slippery and imprecise term, much debated by the movements that use it” (x). Throughout the book she backs this definition by listing new methods of activism for a wide variety of goals ranging from stopping wars, punishing

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homophobic officials, protecting forests and animals, protesting against racism and injustice, demanding equality and access, to more ambitious objectives like changing the world order.

The book is structured chronologically starting in the 1970s when anti-Vietnam War sentiments peaked, and concluding with the recent decade with the spreading of the occupy movements and global protests. In the introduction, Kauffman describes the earliest stage in the history of the New Left and radical movements. Her emphasis on approaching the history of post-1960s American radical movements through the lens of direct action as she herself claims (x), distinguishes her work.

The first chapter, “Mayday,” evokes the Mayday protest against the Vietnam War. Its importance, according to Kauffman, rests in its decentralized structure and dependence on affinity groups—small assemblages of roughly five to fifteen people who take part in an action jointly, planning their participation collectively. “Mayday” failed to achieve the stated goal to paralyze Washington, D. C. and “disrupt the basic functions of the federal government through nonviolent action” (2). Yet it successfully introduced new forms of action like blockading streets, snarling traffic, occupying government buildings, and creating social chaos. At the end of the chapter, Kauffman discusses what led to the decline of the 1960s radical movements in the following years, attributing it to the economic crisis of 1973 and the end of the Vietnam War, as well as to poor strategic decisions and flawed organizational structures within these movements.

“Small Changes” introduces the emergence of smaller “identity-based” movements and groups in the 1970s and 1980s. They focused on particular causes and/or forms of oppression, such as the protection of the environment, gay and queer rights, minorities’ rights, HIV, and anti-Apartheid. Kauffman reveals how activism during this period was characterized by being more efficiently organized than before, making it become more appealing to politically educated participants. She further explains how this led to the establishment of alternative communities based on counter-institutions, such as abortion clinics, ecology centers, women’s shelters, and educational institutions, along with alternative media tools including new publishing houses, bookstores, newspapers, TV channels, and radio stations. Such alternatives transformed activism into an on-going work challenging the functions of traditional institutions.

“In your face” examines more chaotic styles of protest, especially the in-your-face style that characterized the era of American radicalism from the 1980s to the 1990s. This style lacked both a clear strategy and plain goals but it was eager to “harass, disrupt and annoy” (88). Kauffman offers the 1984

protests outside the Democratic Party headquarters as a case study: on this occasion, radicals did not protest to impose a certain agenda but rather to reject the two-party system, claiming that both the Democrats and the Republicans are undemocratic and corrupted by political money.

The evolution of radical movements in the 1980s was most obvious in the creation of new groups like the ACT UP (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power), which was formed in 1987 and had 87 chapters throughout the United States. ACT UP arranged protests and sit-ins and protected abortion clinics. What distinguished ACT UP and made it one of the most innovative, influential, and effective radical organizations in the late twentieth century is that it had better access to resources and infrastructures, along with the degree of sophistication and awareness its adherents displayed in dealing with the mainstream media. ACT UP was especially effective in using direct action methods to push through an array of policy changes that saved millions of lives. Kauffman also tackles issues of race and gender and how they affected radical movements. Many activists of color were reluctant to participate in ACT UP action, for they felt they were needed just to legitimize and diversify a white-defined and white-led movement without being truly represented or consulted. On the other hand, many lesbian and gay activists started to splinter from ACT UP to create their own organizations because they felt their issues were neglected, marginalized, and ignored despite their constant participation in many of the social change campaigns.

The final chapter, "Turned Up," reviews the direct action movements from the 1990s onwards, when a global form of resistance movements and radical actions against globalization, capitalism, and US imperialism were developed. These included the 1999 Seattle WTO protest, "Occupy Wall Street," and the "99 Percent," as well as the open resistance to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. These campaigns were embraced and adopted in many cities all over the world.

Kauffman provides a broader discussion devoted to the issue of race, where Bill Clinton's "tough on crime" policies and the ongoing war on drugs generated a higher rate of imprisonment among young blacks and Latinos. This hostile atmosphere led to a new wave of people-of-color-led activism, protesting against the biased criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex. Social media became the new tool of mobilizing and recruiting: the effective use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter is a case in point.

The book may generate some unease for readers by presenting a long list of movements, mass protests, organizations, and activists' names. Quite unavoidably, this review partly reiterates this arrangement. Kauffman added

another 30 pages of notes that will be helpful if one uses her book as a source for academic research.

By way of conclusion, one must revisit Heller's question whether it is worth protesting at all. On the one hand, the power structure might prove immune to protests. Capitalism still dominates, the rain forests are shrinking, the climate change is a Chinese hoax for some, and black lives matter but not enough to stop teenagers from being shot for wearing the wrong hoodie. On the other hand, these movements are the alternative voices that break the silence of the status quo. These movements set the line between people and governments, and pave the way for more effective actions that can transfer activism into real political power.

In her later work, *How to Read Protests: the Art of Organizing and Resistance* published by the University of California, in 2018, Kauffman provides a broader attempt to answer this question by reading and analyzing some of the most famous acts of demonstration and resistance, focusing on the elements that enabled success or led to failure. According to Kauffman, the ultimate measure of any movement's success is its ability of moving "from protest to power, from an outside critique to inside influence" (11). The impact of demonstrations and protests, however, might be easier to perceive when it comes to political issues, but harder if not impossible when it comes to human endeavor and social change. Thus, books like Kauffman's are essential to grasp, and embrace the work and struggle of those who spoke up when silence was a virtue, who resisted when injustice was the norm and launched a war against wars, who dare disturb the universe.

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