

Book Review

# **Don't Leave Your Friends Behind: Concrete Ways to Support Families in Social Justice Movements and Communities**

by Victoria Law, China Martens (Eds.). Oakland, California: PM Press, 2012. \$17.95 US, paper. ISBN: 978-1-60486-396-3. Pages: 1-234.

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*Don't Leave Your Friends Behind* is a book that arises from the practices of anti-oppression activists largely based in the United States. The contributors to this book are arguing that parents and children need to be central to movements for social change and not relegated to the periphery. It is focused on experiences of inclusion and exclusion of families from activist practices. These practices - rallies, marches, protests - are often understood to be the activities of primarily young, able-bodied and economically independent individuals who have time and flexibility to attend and organize such events. This book offers thoughts and stories from people who are trying to create more inclusive spaces within an economic and social system they oppose as well as within the movements that are aligned with their opposition. Raising children is posited as a necessary foundation for social change and a valuable source of energy and inspiration for organizations that advocate for this change. The social reproduction that occurs through the act of bringing new people into the world and socializing them as they mature is seen here as an inherently political act. The authors put forward different methods for including children and their caregivers within groups that advocate for social change.

The editors of this book intend that it be used as a resource for people within activist communities and particularly for those who are intent on creating non-hierarchical structures they hope can and will supplant the

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dominant structures, both economic and social, that they identify as the root cause of oppression. One of the primary means of oppression they oppose is to exclude people who are identified as 'lesser' or 'othered' by characteristics such as ability, appearance, wealth and age. They identify children and their caregivers as being a group that is not only excluded from positions of self-determination by dominant social forces but also within movements that do progressive work. They are concerned about the absence of spaces for children and the problems of providing childcare amongst social justice groups. Changes must be made to allow both parents and children to be a part of the political work around which these groups are organized. This book also serves as a reflection and expression of the many challenges of the 'behind-the-protests' work of political organizing amongst and inside activist communities.

It covers a broad range of different groups with over fifty short essays written by a variety of activists mostly based in the US, with a few additional voices from Canada and the UK. The different narratives are organized in seven chapters. The editors of the book arrange the chapters so that they progress from descriptions of the many problems that people encounter when they are involved in social justice groups towards possible solutions to these problems. This allows the book to provide an outline of a broadly unifying project that can be applied in many different spaces. This structure is designed to motivate readers to look towards solutions that include as many activists as possible rather than dwell on differences and difficulties. Each chapter features a number of independent essays that differ in style, focus and even language. One chapter on transformative justice and childcare is presented in a graphic narrative form. Several chapters contain a mix of English and Spanish that reflects the specific and dominant US context of much of the book. The benefit of this format is that there are likely to be specific chapters that appeal to many potential readers of the book. This matches the intent of the editors that the book be useful to diverse people who can pick out certain contributions that are helpful in their specific situations and ignore or browse those that are not relevant. The drawback to this format is that the book does not have a clear overall analysis or argument.

Consequently, although the editors have tried to slot these various works into a broader schema, there is a great deal of crossover, complexity and even contradictions between the various pieces. Given the variety of political analyses referenced within the book, it is not a surprise that it is difficult to discern any broad conclusions. The book could have greatly benefited from some editorial material that added a greater

understanding of the context of the many disparate chapters. It seems to offer an implicit critique of certain social justice 'movements' without much analysis of why these problems exist and how they connect to the broader struggles in which they are located. While all the authors may be able to agree on the importance of an idea such as 'inclusivity', their experiences and analyses of exclusion and ideas for being inclusive vary considerably. This may be because there is a larger political focus on creating a community of diversity but this is not made very explicit within the book. Some of individual authors advocate anarchist, vegan, Christian, and/or feminist analyses that can all make interesting contributions to political thought but the book as a whole does not convey a cohesive political critique.

Readers who are not already engaged with these discussions and debates might find this lack of cohesion makes the book difficult to read as there are only a few framing remarks throughout the book. However, this format is helpful in showcasing many disparate approaches to social activism around children. For instance, there are chapters on schooling that advocate avoiding the public school system and others that describe different ways to navigate and advocate within public schools and in the interests of children and their caregivers. It is an excellent resource for those who may not have personal access to such a vibrant and wide-ranging political conversation and offers social researchers a set of intriguing and useful primary documents created by activists who are grappling with practical and specific aspects of organizing and building solidarity. This book allows access to debates that help shape the many different forms of social justice organizations and fuel the creative process that is required to positively resist oppression and fight for social change.