

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

CAROL J.C. MAXWELL, *Pro-Life Activists in America: Meaning, Motivation, and Direct Action*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, x + 278 pp., Index.

Carol Maxwell's book is a welcome addition to the short list of scholarly book-length studies of the pro-life movement in North America. Based on a year's fieldwork and interviews with a snowball sample of over 80 activists, Maxwell's study examines pro-life activists who engaged in "direct action"—picketing, sit-ins, and above all, "rescue"—at abortion clinics in St. Louis, Missouri from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

Direct action was begun in 1978 by Catholic university students with backgrounds in the antiwar and antinuclear movements, eager to distinguish themselves from more conservative, middle-class conventional pro-life activists. Joined by the latter when conventional activism was seen as ineffectual, by 1980 St. Louis was at the centre of pro-life direct action in the United States. After the local archbishop came out against direct action, support declined, repression increased, and the tactic virtually disappeared, along with the participation of liberal college-educated activists. They were replaced in the mid-80s by a new cohort of conservative Catholics new to both direct action and anti-abortion activism, who abandoned Gandhian non-violence and undertook increasingly militant direct action, such as entering clinics, that isolated them from conventional pro-life activists. The previous cohort's rhetoric of social justice was replaced by one of religious purpose. Direct action and religious zeal were escalated further beginning in 1986, with the formation of Operation Rescue and an influx of Protestant evangelicals mobilized by televangelists. Dissension between Catholic and Protestant organizations, and leadership problems among the latter at the local and national levels led to the virtual demise of direct action in St. Louis by 1992, leaving only a small remnant of full-time activists dedicated to increasing militant actions such as sieges of abortion clinics, while others returned to more conventional forms of action.

The narrative of anti-abortion activism in St. Louis provides the context for an examination of the meaning of direct action for those who engaged in it, and their motivations for doing so. Based on the narratives of her informants, Maxwell explains activists' commitment to direct action as a quintessentially American individual quest for identity, as a therapeutic response to individual psychological and emotional needs, as a way of coping with grief (whether real or created by anti-abortion rhetoric), as a way in which some of the small minority of women who suffer psychological problems after having abortions cope with those problems, and as a process of moral reasoning. The book

concludes with a brief quantitative analysis of correlates of frequency of participation in direct action, and of gender differences in motivation.

The book shows that the participants were more demographically diverse than in previous studies. Female activists were most often employed, not housewives (nonetheless, female direct activists' objectives were rooted in an extension of women's nurturing and caring roles in the home), there were more men, income distribution was less uneven, and religious affiliations were more diverse. It also shows that, as in any social movement, the motivations of participants were diverse. The book is strongest in showing the individual emotional dynamics of activists in changing political and personal circumstances. Yet, although it is certainly not her intention, Maxwell's account of direct activists' motivations tends to reinforce the pro-choice stereotype of pro-life activists as psychologically disturbed religious fanatics.

As with any study, there are a variety of quibbles: lack of consideration of period and cohort effects in the analysis of 'persistence' in activism, or of type of activism in comparing demographic characteristics with other studies; the unexamined assumption that retrospectively recalled motivations can be used to explain past activism. But as a sociologist of social movements, my main response to the book is frustration over missed opportunities, because of Maxwell's ignorance of the last quarter-century's sociological thinking on social movements. It is a shame, because her research could have contributed to our understanding of moral reasoning and emotions in mobilization, in social movement organizations, and in high-risk activism within a cycle of protest. The book's insularity is also a source of annoyance: although she uses previous studies such as Kristin Luker's *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (1984) and Faye Ginsburg's *Contested Lives* (1989) as points of reference, Maxwell does not even seem to be aware of Michael Cuneo's *Catholics Against the Church* (1989). Considering the importance of religion in anti-abortion activism, and the many parallels between the two cases, is a remarkable omission, and contributes to the impression that Maxwell does not realize how peculiarly American her respondents sound.

Despite its flaws, *Pro-Life Activists in America* is worth a look for sociologists interested in social movements in general and the abortion conflict in particular. I cannot recommend the book for student use, however.

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