

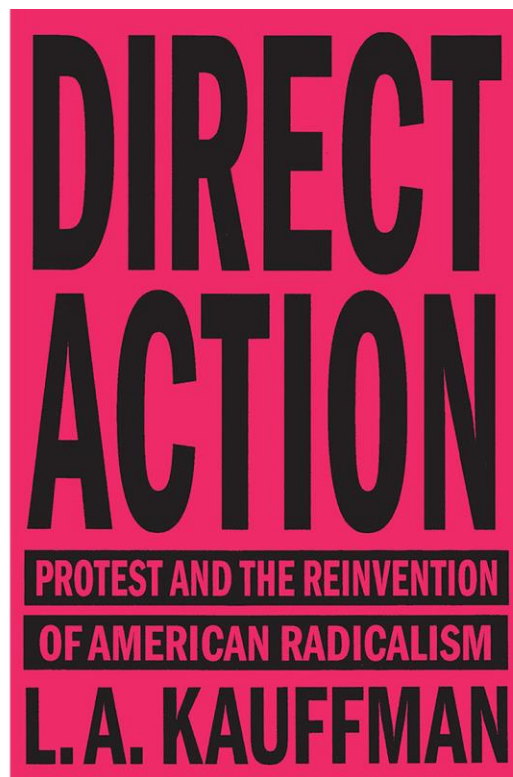
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

*Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American
Radicalism* by L.A. Kauffman

Reviewed by George Lakey



DIRECT ACTION: *PROTEST AND THE REINVENTION OF AMERICAN RADICALISM* BY L.A. KAUFFMAN (VERSO, 2017)

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REVIEWED BY GEORGE LAKEY

In this book journalist and activist L.A. Kauffman describes changes in American radical activism from 1971 to 2014. The author focuses on tactics, organizational forms, and culture. In all three of those areas, the author shows us how alive to innovation radicals have been. Even though revolutionary aspirations didn't come to pass in the big picture, the changes in activist consciousness and means of struggle continue to play out in today's era of Trump.

In this review I will describe some of the book's contributions to understanding the movement's innovations of process as well as product, notably its increasingly egalitarian tactics and organizational models and increasing leadership by women and queer organizers. I will then use my own work on intentional learning to propose deeper analysis on the level of movement strategy (especially after 1980 when Ronald Reagan became President), and argue that the book reflects radicals' own frequent neglect of intentional reflection from experience as a way to heighten the learning curve that successful movements need.

Kauffman begins in Washington, D.C. in 1971 with the dramatic tactics used by "Mayday," an anti-Vietnam war protest in which protesters warned either the government would stop the war or the protesters would stop the government. The author takes us through several decades of confrontations that included tactical innovation – sanctuary in churches for Central American refugees, blockades of nuclear plant construction sites, and Occupy Wall Street.

Kauffman also shows us organizational experimentation that reflects anti-authoritarian values. The reader gets to see, for example, how differently decision-making was done in the anti-nuclear blockades and Occupy, than was the mode in the sixties civil rights movement as shown by the award-winning film *Selma*. The seventies demonstrators often formed affinity groups (5-20 people acting as units) who not only looked out for each other but participated in decision-making by sending their spokesperson to a "spokes council" that made decisions for the entire action.

That attention to process was both a reflection of the increasingly egalitarian culture of the demonstrators and in turn gave space for further assertion of equality. Kauffman shows us how identity politics became increasingly confrontational with reluctant white, or heterosexual, or male activists forced to adopt more egalitarian practices.

Supported by photos and graphics from the period, Kauffman's vivid story-telling assists the reader to get the flavor of what was going on in the decades when even Ronald Reagan's presidency couldn't stop American radicals

from expressing themselves. "The new movements," Kauffman writes, "rejected hierarchical organizational structures, traditional leadership models, and rigid ideologies, and they sought forms of activism and political engagement that could preserve rather than subsume difference and multiplicity. Women, especially queer women, played crucial roles in this process of political reinvention, infusing this new radicalism with feminist practices and values through the very process of movement-building."

The book, however, has a different view from mine of the outcome. The author says in the introduction, "This is a story about dealing with defeat and marginalization." My disagreement has to do with the author's restricted lens. Kauffman is fascinated with tactics, organizational forms, and activist culture but not with strategy. I like the strategy level as well – the interaction between a movement's goals and the opponent's effort to prevent the movement's success. I'm especially interested in how movements do or don't learn from their own experience, changing their strategy (as well as organizational and cultural practices) in order to win.

Kauffman doesn't help us see whether activists gained victories from 1971 to 2014. Here is just a partial list of victories for nonviolent direct action campaigns, indicating strategic learning that was going on among activists from their experience.

- (1) The U.S. government lost the base it needed to continue to wage the war in Vietnam, despite strategic mistakes made by the anti-war movement that were corrected in later campaigns.
- (2) The U.S. support of apartheid was sufficiently damaged, simultaneous with parallel undermining in other countries, to precipitate change in South Africa. The U.S. movement's biggest strategic learning was to make the issue local, primarily through targeted divestment and boycott campaigns.
- (3) The U.S. was prevented from invading Central America to prop up client dictatorships there. One of the movement's strategic lessons was how to increase the personal stake and fervor of Americans through the sanctuary tactic, and to enroll a Catholic constituency.
- (4) The medical industry and government were forced to intervene effectively in the AIDS crisis. ACT-UP avoided much of the time and energy wasting of previous movements (rallies and marches, for example) by going directly into tactics of disruption.
- (5) The U.S. nuclear industry's goal of 1000 plants was defeated by the grassroots movement, leaving the industry and its powerful allies only a fraction of that number.
- (6) A substantial part of the U.S. apparel industry was forced to accept a code of conduct by the student sweatshop movement.

Both (5) and (6) learned to use a strategy of simultaneous local campaigns with local targets while confronting the national power structure. The various campaigns focused on learning from each other's strengths and mistakes.

(7) The fast-food industry was forced to pay more for vegetables so farm workers could gain higher wages, by the Immokalee Workers, a student-farm worker coalition using direct action including boycotts.

Kauffman is right to observe overall losses for radicals and liberals in the period 1971-2014, but the author's lack of a macro-view distorts the real picture. Movements *continued to win in the U.S. through the 1970s*, but then the counter-revolution launched by the economic elite in 1980 through the Reagan presidency reversed the overall rate of wins in later years. Most movements went on the defensive, struggling to hold on to previously won gains, instead of campaigning for new and even more progressive goals. Military generals agree with Gandhi that going on the defensive is a fundamental strategic error. Notably, the LGBT movement rejected the defensive posture embraced by labor, women, civil rights, educational reformers, and alone continued – dramatically – to move strongly forward.

Devoted as we radical teachers are to learning, we're bound to ask whether radicals can accelerate their learning by becoming more intentional about it.

In 1971, also the beginning of Kauffman's story, I co-founded a network of revolutionaries called Movement for a New Society (MNS).¹ To reduce the dogmatism that often diminishes the learning curve of radicals, we adopted this slogan: "Most of what we need to know to build a new society, we have yet to learn."

Digging into Paolo Freire, we embarked on a couple of decades of action/reflection. Our learning accelerated, not only in relation to sexism, racism, heterosexism and classism, but also in how to develop vision and strategy for change.

The MNS intention to learn came from how much we wanted to *win*. Each direct action had objectives, so assessment produced learning. We also evaluated a series of actions in light of the strategic course we'd set to reach broader goals. Our experiments with anti-authoritarian practices went "big-time" through the anti-nuclear campaigns -- affinity groups, spokes councils, and the like – and continued to spread through intensive MNS

workshops. MNS trainers were struck by how much more people learn when they set goals for themselves. Of course teachers like to urge students to reflect and assess, because reflection makes empowerment possible. Campaigns have goals, which is why campaigns support a learning curve, whereas one-off protests teach little. Individual activists are far more empowered by direct action campaigns than by disconnected protests.

After MNS was discontinued Barbara Smith, an African American community organizer in Philadelphia, and I founded Training for Change to pick up the thread of intentional learning for activists. We deepened our use of group dynamics, experiential exploration of cultural and other differences, and conflict tools. We forged a pedagogy that crosses cultural lines and increases empowerment, and called the pedagogy "direct education," a more intense form of popular education that uses the power of the learning group as a resource.²

When Canada's most radical trade union asked me to revamp its popular education-based leadership development program, I turned to direct education. After initial resistance, the union's worker educators found the pedagogy more in tune with the politics and direct action strategies of the union itself. Training for Change has by now taught direct education to movement facilitators in over 30 countries, although its main emphasis remains the U.S. Its mission is to heighten the activist learning curve, so movements can learn to win more often and transform their societies.

Notes

¹ MNS was laid down in 1988. Activist-scholar Andrew Cornell describes the group in his 2011 book published by AK Press, *Oppose and Propose: Lessons from Movement for a New Society*.

² George Lakey, *Facilitating Group Learning: Strategies for Success with Adult Learners*, 2010, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



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