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Book Review of The Contemporary U.S. Peace Movement

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Book Review
The Contemporary U. S. Peace Movement

by
Laura L. Toussaint
(New York: Routledge, 2009), 171 pages.

Reviewed by Emily Regan Wills
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The Contemporary US Peace Movement is a timely work for scholars of contemporary social movements, particularly those organized against current American foreign policy and in support of peace and nonviolence. Through a survey of members of peace organizations with branches or headquarters in Washington, DC, Toussaint aims to explore how members of the contemporary peace movement frame the movement, including an examination of the uses of identity, the post 9/11 context, and future challenges and opportunities for the movement. She aims to speak both to scholars of social movements and to participants in peace movements, and identifies as someone co-located both within the movement and as an academic.

The data for the study is drawn from a written survey with 251 members of 43 different organizations, and then follow-up telephone interviews with 33 of those respondents. The organizations (and subsequently the respondents) were divided into two categories: 'primarily peace,' which emphasizes the absence of violence, and 'peace with justice,' which includes an analysis of other social justice questions into their understanding of peace (A list of organizations is not provided, nor are the criteria on which they were sorted made clear, or any examples of 'peace' versus 'peace with justice' framing given; this information would have been useful to both contemporary and future scholars). Toussaint collects demographic data for participants, which shows her participants to be largely white, highly educated but low in personal income, and over 60% Christian. In an interesting finding, members of the 'peace with justice' category were more likely to be Christian, Democrats, and liberals than members of the 'primarily peace' group, though Christians, Democrats, and liberals

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made up a majority or plurality in both groups.

Toussaint's major findings are that multiple identity frameworks, and the intersections between them, are crucial for peace-activist mobilization; that, among committed peace activists, the post-9/11 security environment was actually productive, rather than inhibiting; and that the peace movement is inherently multi-issue, rather than being centered on a single policy goal. In addition, she addresses questions of movement diversity, arguing that, while the peace movement has diversified, it still has progress to make, and suggests that most of the conditions of the contemporary movement, such as a lack of clear movement leadership and a broad range of priorities and goals, are both obstacles and opportunities for the movement. Two of her smaller findings are particularly intriguing. First, for her respondents, Christian identity is central to movement participation; Christian ethics motivate activists, churches and religious organizations serve as central institutional linkages to the movement. At the same time, the contemporary alignment of Christianity with right-wing and belligerent politics drives Christians in the movement to be particularly outspoken in their identification. Also interesting is the gap she finds between what activists believe the goals of the movement should be, and what they currently are; overwhelming majorities of all respondents believe social justice issues should be incorporated into the peace movement, but less than half believe they are incorporated, while respondents agreed anti-war activities were the primary focus of the movement, but disagreed that they should be central. Both of these suggest a contemporary peace movement that is formed in complex reaction to broader questions of American politics, and which struggles with both reactive and proactive approaches to issue framing and movement form.

There are two major limitations to this study, the first of which Toussaint acknowledges: the overwhelming whiteness of her survey respondents, as well as their general homogeneity. In addition to race, the ages of her participants are skewed; over half of her phone interviewees, and just short of half of her survey respondents are over 50 years old, and many have been involved in peace movements for more than 20 years, which suggests that she is largely measuring the opinions of participants in the 1970s anti-Vietnam and 1980s anti-nuclear peace movements on the contemporary peace movement con-

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text. While this is an important segment to examine, it provides a snapshot of only part of the contemporary peace movement.

There is also a critical thinness to the study overall. For instance, although there are some differences in responses between 'primarily peace' and 'peace with justice' group members, Toussaint makes no attempt to explain how these responses might be related to the different goals of the groups, or try to understand the groups better through these differences. Given that 77% of the 'primarily peace' sample believe that social justice issues should be incorporated into the movement, the division between the two categories is less than clear. Although under 10% of her survey respondents self-identify as people of color (and even fewer in the phone interviews), she accepts their views of racial diversity in the movement uncritically, although previous research shows that the views of whites and of people of color on what constitutes adequate diversity are rarely in agreement. There is also little contextualization of the survey results in the context of the empirical actions of the various peace groups of which the respondents are members.

This book will be of interest to many different sorts of scholars of social movements. First, for anyone working on contemporary peace and anti-war movements, it provides a well-documented data point with plenty of information on activist preferences and perspectives. For those interested in the work identity does in social movements, it provides a new set of information about intersectionality and multiple identities as movement mobilization factors. While it has demographic limitations, it serves as a good resource for understanding the sector of the movement it profiles. While the lack of critical edge about the movement does detract from its value, movement members, and scholars interested in supporting peace movements, will find it an interesting read, and are likely to come away from it with new ideas about how to transform their peace movements, and how to locate movement priorities in the future.

Emily Regan Wills is a Ph.D. candidate in the Politics department at the New School for Social Research and an adjunct faculty member in the Global Studies Department, New School for General Studies. Her current research focuses on the Arab-American community in New York City, and everyday transnational political relationships, particularly in social movement contexts.

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