

BOOK REVIEW

Judy Rebick. 2009. *Transforming Power: From the Personal to the Political*. Toronto: Penguin. ISBN 978-0-14-316946-8. Paperback: 24.00 CAD. Pages: 277.

Reviewed by Tammy Findlay
University of British Columbia

I often use Judy Rebick's books for teaching. They are clearly written, present primary research in unique ways (such as through dialogue and personal narratives), are suited to popular and academic audiences, and most importantly, they inspire a sense of hope that change is possible, and that ordinary people drive that change. Her recent book, *Transforming Power*, continues in this tradition. It is about alternatives and process.

Rebick highlights visionary over 'anti' movements, and the creative over the reactive. For her, the greatest strength of a movement like the World Social Forum is 'the way they make you feel as if another world is possible. Because so much of the problem in society is that sense of powerlessness, that feeling that nothing we do makes any difference' (23). Overcoming widespread cynicism and hopelessness then, is key to revitalizing the Left. But for fundamental change to occur, Rebick argues, it requires shifting from a preoccupation with policy outcomes, to focusing on political process and social relationships.

To make this case, the book guides readers through several locations (including Porto Alegre, Brazil; Venezuela; Bolivia; Palestine; USA; and Canada) and a wide range of themes: bottom-up change, participatory democracy, racism, colonialism, religion and spirituality, open source software, environmentalism, indigenous and community-based knowledge, organizing, food politics, leadership, power, militarism, community development, market-based strategies, constitutional reform, and electoral politics. Even though it covers a lot of territory, it is all linked together through the emphasis on a diversity of tactics that prioritise democratic processes.

This is why the book spends considerable time discussing Barack Obama and his campaign. The appeal of Obama is not his policy positions (which are far from radical), but in the procedural values that his leadership style embodies. Obama's emphasis on hope, unity, consensus-building and grass roots mobilization, Rebick suggests, is shared with

Bolivia's Evo Morales and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. In advancing this argument, she also makes an important intervention into debates about representation, noting that, '[f]rom my perspective, the victory of a black man who presents as a consensus-builder and not a polarizer is just as much of a feminist victory as the victory of a woman who represents the political establishment' (94). This observation embraces the history of feminists as pioneers in thinking about questions of process.

In fact, in the search for new strategies, Rebick draws from the past, reclaiming the Second Wave feminist notion that 'the personal is political.' She says that

the problem goes beyond patriarchal modes of functioning to our very notions of power. The Left has always seen power as being located in the state and in the corporations. The way to change the world was to get state power and make changes to state and economic structures. The women's movement, anti-racist groups, and the environmental movement introduced the idea that we must also change our personal behaviour if we want to change the world (131).

This means, for example, that people reflect on racism and colonialism in social relationships, and that they engage in leadership that empowers, rather than controls others. To initiate these conversations, Rebick starts by implicating herself, and sharing her own personal struggles throughout the book.

She also gives readers the opportunity to extend the dialogue beyond the book and to keep track of the people, places, movements and debates through the website. In the 'continuing Epilogue' at www.transformingpower.ca, we can find links to more information, post comments to the blog and read updates. So when I found myself wondering what Rebick would say about the departure of Van Jones (the Special Advisor for Green Jobs, who figures prominently in the book) from the Obama Administration, the answer was close at hand.

There are places in the book that do raise some questions. When Rebick says that sectarianism on the Left is waning, that the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas is dead, and that Milton Friedman and free market capitalism have been wholly discredited, it makes me hope that her optimism isn't just wishful thinking. Also, reflecting on Second Wave feminism, Rebick believes that '[w]e ended up challenging the men, but not sufficiently the way power is practised' (95). It would be interesting to know how she would compare the Second Wave's conceptualization of

power with the Third Wave, and to what extent the politics of Third Wave feminism have influenced her thinking on democratic process.

The larger question, not only for Rebeck, but for the project of participatory democracy more broadly, has to do with the tension between local control and the offloading of responsibility. This can be seen in her discussion of Porto Alegre, where child care was identified as a community priority. Rebeck explains that the

PT [Brazilian Workers' Party], being socialists, believed in state-run child care, but they couldn't afford it. Community groups stepped forward and offered to house the child-care centres for a fraction of the price it would cost in the public sector...This compromise began to build trust (40).

Here, the contradiction is clear between community control of social services, on the one hand, and shifting the costs and responsibility onto community (usually women), on the other. These debates over public versus community-based services are happening right now in the child care movement in Canada.

Overall, *Transforming Power* is a rousing endorsement of tactical diversity, and a welcome challenge to put democratic process at the centre of progressive politics. As Rebeck tells us, 'Democracy, it turns out, is the biggest enemy of neoliberalism, for a system that redistributes wealth from the poor to the rich by definition cannot be a democratic system' (39).