

PREFACE

BY JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER

I was eighteen years old and happily ensconced in a small, progressive, mid-western college by the time I could be proudly radical. That is, through my feminist group and my guerrilla theater troupe, I finally had a band of like-minded friends who supported my values and enabled me to feel like I “belonged,” rather than being a weird, crazy, bitter outsider.

I also belonged in ways other than being radical. I remember learning sophomore year about intersecting oppressions of class, race, education, gender, sexuality, appearance, religion, etc., and feeling very grateful to be a woman. I hadn’t ever had any overt sense of being ripped off by Mother Nature or the world at large, but suddenly, at college in 1988, I realized that by dint of being a woman, I was oppressed.

This was actually a relief because, as I said, I was learning about hierarchy and the cruel and unjust use of authority and feeling a bit awkward to be at the top of the food chain, as it were: you know, white, middle class, Protestant, straight (at the time), educated, thin-ish. (Granted, I was from North Dakota, but I didn’t realize that might qualify me as oppressed—or at least deprived—until I moved to New York.)

Still, why be relieved? Why identify as oppressed? Well, at the time, I was learning about power in a new way and the overarching message I had absorbed was that power (“the ability to do, act, or affect strongly”) was negative. *Power corrupts. Power requires the disempowerment of others. Power might be an aphrodisiac, missy, but the kind that will make you wake up next to Henry Kissinger!*

Being oppressed made me feel, paradoxically, *powerful* as a radical. I wasn’t one of those nasty oppressors. I was automatically, as of birth, part of the innocent club. My oppression gave me permission to speak in left-wing settings. *Those white guys*, I thought at the time, *they’ve had their time to talk—they don’t have permission here. No oppression, no dice.* Of course, this kind of philosophy inevitably hoisted me by my own petard, since in a diverse group of women I might be the equivalent of the white middle-class guy, too privileged to have any credence in a radical setting. (*But wait, I’d think, I’m also bisexual! Does that count for anything?*)

I wasn’t always so confused about power. In fact, four years before college, I had an experience that I now recognize as my formative activist click. I was fifteen and living in Fargo. My sister was sixteen and also happened to be sixteen weeks pregnant. She didn’t want to tell my parents, even though they were pro-choice and certainly would have paid for her procedure and supported her, so she turned to me. I remember feeling a thrill when she laid down the problem and the deadline: We needed to raise \$200 in just a few days or she wouldn’t be able to get an abortion in North Dakota and would have to travel to get a more expensive procedure in Minneapolis, four hours away.

I hopped into action, phoning my one acquaintance that I thought might have \$200 and not tell on us. His name was K., a senior in high school who had portrayed Danny Zuko in our recent school production of *Grease*. (I was Cha-Cha.) K. had to pay for his own college the next year and I guessed, correctly, that he had savings. Long story short, he helped me. When I steered my bike into the parking lot of the Fargo Women’s Health Clinic, ten twenties bulging in the back pocket of my Benetton jeans, and then handed off the dough to the receptionist, I never felt so good. It was a mix of success, relief, righteousness, and power. I felt like I had the ability to have an impact on the world, my community, my sister’s dire situation, and my own life. I was *powerful*.

Power is a tricky thing; one that is integral to the life of a social-justice activist. This is something I know but at times have forgotten or misunderstood in my journey. My feelings of relief to be called powerless (by virtue of being female) in college reflected a fear of being seen as inferior in radical terms because of my other privileges. Was I really interested in transforming the world? Or did I simply want to feel superior?

In Mark Andersen’s *All the Power: Revolution Without Illusion*, he asks exactly

that crucial question of us radicals and idealists, as well as so many other challenging queries. He writes about real power in all of its potential. He examines the power of radicals—the ones that want nothing to do with the existing system, who don't go to church or drive SUVs. And he talks about the power of—hmmm, shall we call them the regular folks?—the ones that have lawns or respect the police, but who are nevertheless invested in a socially just world.

There is an inherent tension between the radicals and the “milder” visionaries, but Mark points out the illusions that we radicals sometimes drape ourselves in that can keep us from really making change or truly connecting to the communities we purport to want to help. He describes, for instance, the hopelessness of simply hating America, and invites a vision of patriotism for us lefties. It's our country, too. And furthermore, if America is as powerful (and oppressive) as we activists think it is, we *have* to be part of this country; shaping it, not just running from it so its taint doesn't besmirch our pure idea of ourselves. (*I might be American but I'm not part of the problem, this ideology seems to say, I hate McDonald's and I'm wearing hemp! As if America is only its corporate brand names and not the millions who work in the fast-food dives or live in shelters or teach in the high schools.*) As Mark asks, “If we give up on any possible redemption of this country, what is our alternative?”

Mark's alternative is to believe in the country, to believe in the flawed middle class, and to believe in the radical punk rock scene that gave him his most profound arena in which to be an activist. A call to reclaim power in all its possibility is one of the gifts of this anti-manifesto.

This book is also the very instructive memoir of a man who has devoted decades to radical movements, including ones we often think of as politically retrograde—like Mark's devotion to his Catholic Church. It's the story of an idealist's struggle to create a separate margin that would be much better—more utopian, more egalitarian—than the mainstream, and it is the story of his acknowledgment of the elitism those margins can unwittingly contain. Mark's message is that we *can* have revolution, but we must do it with our eyes wide open, honestly, and with acknowledgment that the mainstream has a power that we must connect to as well. After all, the mainstream has the power of sheer numbers—and if we assume no possible redemption for or value in that huge populace, then where is our revolution?

In *All the Power*, Mark talks a lot about reasons to join radical move-

ments that have to do with personal gain—such as needing to fit in or to find a venue in which we can easily become leaders and earn big reputations. Without overly judging these personal, perfectly human reasons that people are drawn to alternative movements, Mark nudges us to an authentic understanding of revolution as the common good: social justice for all. When we try to “be the change we want to see in the world,” as Gandhi said, we must understand power, understand our part in it and believe that we are powerful.

For my part, I no longer secretly say to myself, “I'm so relieved I'm oppressed as a woman.” I have realized that the missing sentiment embroidered in that relief was, “I'm not responsible.” *All the Power* says that we *are* responsible—and, moreover, it says that we can change the world.

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