Jessica K. Taft’s *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism & Social Change Across the Americas* (2011) provides a long overdue account of girls’ political identities and practices in the twenty-first century. The text brings critical visibility to girls as current political actors and “illuminate[s] the experiences and perspectives of these uniquely positioned agents of social change” (4). Taft’s findings from her interviews of 75 girl activists challenge the oft-presumed invisibility of girls’ political activism. Throughout the book, Taft strategically positions girls’ stories of social change in the context of well-documented left-leaning and progressive social movements in the Americas, such as, for example, the Zapatistas of Mexico City; the Chavez-inspired revolution in Venezuela, and the student movements of San Francisco State University. She suggests that “girls’ political practices can provide adult scholars and activists with some intriguing models for effective social movements and social change” (19). True to its title, *Rebel Girls* counters mainstream narratives of girls’ political apathy with powerful vignettes that allow the reader to understand more deeply the contested intersections of gender, age, politics, leadership, empowerment, and girlhood. In the end, readers are left with a single and undeniable truth: teenage girls are powerful political actors with valuable insights and stories to share. The only question is whether or not adults are ready to listen.

Taft’s *Rebel Girls* is a multi-site ethnographic investigation of girls’ activist practices that examines the production of girls’ civic identities and political strategies in five so-called hotspots of social movement activity. Taft conducted qualitative interviews with 75 teenage girl activists (aged from 14 to 18 years) from the San Francisco Bay Area of the United States; Mexico City, Mexico; Caracas, Venezuela; Vancouver, Canada; and Buenos Aires.
Argentina. Throughout the text, she seamlessly integrates girls’ activist voices and experiences with descriptions of each research site in order to document more thoroughly the historical and socio-cultural function of these spaces in the identity construction and social change practices of girls. Taft also includes personal reflection and observation from her own experiences of conducting the research.

The text is divided into two parts: the first half investigates how teenage girls construct their activist identities while the second considers girls’ political practices.

According to Taft, girl activists articulate a new understanding of girlhood that runs counter to popular images of passive victimization or empowered consumer citizenship. They reject the notion that they need to be empowered and draw instead on a clear distinction between empowerment and activism. Empowering girls, Taft argues, is about encouraging girls to think of their lives in individualized terms and “to see their problems as personal troubles, rather than as issues of public concern” (30) whereas, girls’ activism inspires collective vision that requires “actually doing something” to address the root cause of a problem (31). The girl activists featured in this book seek, therefore, to move beyond narratives of individual self-esteem development so as to engage in more sociological discussions of power, intersectionality, and injustice. They confront discourses of youth apathy, tokenism, exceptionalism, and normative girlhood. Yet perhaps what is most striking about Taft’s research is the ways in which girl activists understand “activism [to be] an ordinary practice” of young people’s lives (43); they repeatedly identified themselves as ordinary and decidedly not extraordinary. Girl activists see themselves, rather, “not as isolated individual exceptions to the rule of youth apathy, but as just a few examples of a much more extensive group…. [In other words] their activism is just one part of something larger” than themselves (45).

Girl activists ground their claims to power within the language of democracy, equality, and participatory rights. Taft comments, “In most of my research locations, girl activists criticized adults for not taking their contributions seriously. They acknowledged that they were, for the most part, excluded from meaningful democratic participation and political power in their schools and communities” (54). As a result of this exclusion, girl activists employ rights-based language to challenge their political marginalization and to claim authority. They call attention to adult failures in protecting and promoting the participatory rights of girls and young people, and they further seek to (re)value generational differences as an effective
social change tactic. Based on her conversations with these young activists, Taft notes, “[W]hile there is much that adult activists can teach these young women and a lot that adults can do to support their development as political actors and social movement participants, there is also a great deal that these activists can gain from interacting with teenagers” (70). Moreover, Taft suggests generational differences might work to diversify and strengthen the activist practices of social change movements in some fundamentally necessary and meaningful ways.

Because of the constraints produced by age and gender (such as lack of access to formal political channels or the prejudices underlying gendered stereotypes of girls’ political ineptitude), girl activists employ several discourses to legitimize their authority as significant political actors. One of these discursive strategies includes the rejection of the categories of girl and girlhood as an important aspect of their collective political identities. In Chapter Four: *We Are Not Girls: Escaping and Defining Girlhood*, Taft explores girl activists’ complicated relationship with other girls, girlhood(s) and femininities. She explains:

On the one hand, many of them say that they are still sometimes ‘just a girl’ and like to do ‘girly things,’ and that there are some aspects of girlhood that enhance their activism and social movement participation. But on the other hand, these same girls suggest that becoming activists means that they are no longer girls and that the traits of girlhood and the traits of activism are diametrically opposed to one another (72).

Taft suggests that being a teenager or even a particular type of activist often serves to solidify more concretely girls’ civic identities and practices rather than their girlhoods: this is true for many of the girl activists who describe themselves as being in battle with the commodified media images of stereotypical girlhood and the association of girls with foolishness, dependence, cattiness, and weakness. At the same time, girl activists call upon gender-based ideas of nurturance, emotionality, idealism, connection and responsibility to evidence the value of their activist practices. “Girls draw on a variety of stereotypical and traditional discourses about girlhood in order to argue that ‘girl’ is an identity category that can support and enhance their activism. They also suggest that this is an identity that must be overcome in the process of becoming an activist” (95). In this way girl activists both employ and reject the production of stereotypical girlhood to construct their activist identities.

At the same time, however, Taft notes: “One of the most striking features of girl activists’ relationships to girlhood is their claim that being an activist
means you are no longer a girl…. Despite saying that their girlhood makes them more likely to be activists than their male peers, these young women articulate ‘girl’ and ‘activist’ as mutually conflicting identities” (90). Girl activists associate girlhood with innocence, ignorance, superficiality, and insecurity whereas activism is associated with confidence, independence, and a critical understanding of the world at large. Because of this dichotomous identification, girl activists “dissociated from girlhood and their experiences as girls” in order to assert their activist identities (90). Taft concludes, therefore, that activism “provides girls with a community of young women who are all resisting the narrow confines of a version of girlhood that emphasizes appearance, fashion, and popularity” (84). As a result, their activism allows them to both escape and re-negotiate restrictive gender norms in order to articulate an alternative, more rebellious definition of girl and girlhood linked with political authority and power.

In the second half of Rebel Girls, Taft outlines the specific tactics and strategies used by girl activists to promote their social change goals. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven take readers through the theoretical and practical spaces of girls’ political practices, raising critical questions about how other social movement actors might support girls’ activist efforts, and identifying the challenges and limitations encountered in such partnerships. Additionally, Taft considers how girls’ socio-cultural and geo-political communities inform their specific activist strategies.

It is in Section II that readers gain a stronger understanding of the similarities and differences between girls’ activist communities across the Americas. The key political strategies and tools employed by the girl activists include political education workshops: film screenings, study circles, and cultural events; formal political interventions: lobbying, petition drives, party building, public policy strategizing; traditional social movement practices: community service, charity, fundraising, and development work on human rights or poverty-based issues; and political action alternatives: establishing youth organizations, institutions and cooperatives, health clinics, community-run kitchens, and childcare programs.

Chapter Five, The Street is Our Classroom, explores the function of political education in girls’ activist practices. Taft identifies three distinct types of political education strategies: knowledge construction; feeling production; and ongoing learning. Knowledge construction involves learning about critical issues of concern, developing the necessary political language, and sharing information with peers and other actors, while feeling production is about drawing upon people’s emotions to effect and produce change. In
both contexts, girl activists talk about the importance of open and continual dialogue, as well as ongoing learning processes to ensure the success of change-based movements. Across North America and Latin America girls also speak about the value of political education as an activist tool. Taft notes one significant difference in Latin American girls’ mastery of political language. She comments: “Compared to their North American peers, Latin American girls have more places where they can practice expressing their critical knowledge, expand on their skills of political analysis, and learn more extensive political vocabularies” (109). As a result, Latin American girls express more confidence in formal political spaces than do North American girls who struggle to find the right political language to voice their needs and concerns.

The vast majority of girl activists engage in horizontal participation models and emphasize the importance of political community building. In Chapter Six, Join the Party, Taft considers three strategic and intentional tactics of girls’ participatory politics: the development of pleasurable political communities; shared decision-making and authority; and equitable participation across differences. Taken together, she suggests that girls’ participatory practices parallel the strategies employed by transnational feminist scholars and activists. It is in this way, Taft proposes, that girl activists draw upon their gendered identities to develop more effective and supportive participatory practices for other social movement actors.

In Chapter 7, We’ve Got Spirit: A Politics of Hope, Taft suggests that the expression of hope and possibility can be an effective political strategy for girl activists. She investigates how different groups of girls employ the politics of hope to foster social change in their schools and communities. At the same time, Taft also explores how girl activists “maintain their political optimism in the face of very real and powerful social injustices, problems and crises” (169). Notably, she maintains that the politics of hope is not about girls’ utopian naivety or political inexperience, but that it is, rather, shaped by the intersections of gender, age, and location. As political outsiders, “girl activists willingly and boldly express their hopes and dreams” to challenge and inspire those around them; consequently, they “regularly argue that their hopefulness sets them apart from adults” (153), and other social movement actors. In fact, the girl activists in Taft’s study believe so strongly in the possibilities of change that it becomes almost impossible not to believe them. Girls’ optimism and hope for the future is an essential component of any social change movement, and Taft’s research does well to remind us of that crucial fact.
In sum, *Rebel Girls* is a valuable and accessible read for social movement actors, feminists, girls’ studies scholars, and activists alike. Taft effortlessly brings readers into the complex world of girls’ activism, demonstrating the ways that teenage girls *do* social change in their everyday lives. With the expressed goal of sharing activist tools and strategies, *Rebel Girls* brings critical visibility to the stories and experiences of these valued political actors. Taft in turn shifts the conversation beyond young women’s presumed political apathy and instead positions teenage girls as effective political leaders and peers in social justice movements across the Americas.
Building activist communities: the Rebel Girls guide to creating social change. Girlhood Studies, (2), 136. Retrieved from library.ashford.edu/10.3167/ghs.2014.070210 Berkas, T.H. & Hong, K.L. (2000). First steps in evaluation: Basic tools for asset-building initiatives. Retrieved from Fisher, D. (2008). A quick-start guide to building assets in your prevention program. Retrieved from Fisher, D. (2003). Assets in action: a handbook for making communities better places to grow up. Retrieved from Griffin-Wiesner, J. (2001). Step by Step: A young person’s guide to community change. Re About Social Change Society is constantly changing, and any attempt to summarize this activity with a single sentence or short document will inevitably fall short of its goal. In the case of The Freechild Project, the phrase “social change” is intended to include progressively-oriented activities intended to build democracy. By design this automatically excludes a lot of “social change.” The Guide to Social Change Led By and With Young People is a starting point its up to you to take the next steps. The Guide to Social Change Led By and With Young People - 4 Action includes critically examining popular media images of girls, designing community action and education campaigns, and engaging peers in action throughout communities and across the nation. Social change, in sociology, the alteration of mechanisms within the social structure, characterized by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behaviour, social organizations, or value systems. Throughout the historical development of their discipline, sociologists have borrowed models of social change from other academic fields. In the late 19th century, when evolution became the predominant model for understanding biological change, ideas of social change took on an evolutionary cast, and, though other models have refined modern notions of social change, evolution persists as an underlying pr