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Realistic Pictures, 83 min.

Ezra Haber Glenn

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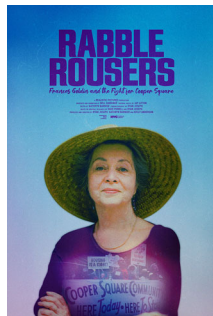
Rabble Rousers: Frances Goldin and the Fight for Cooper Square

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Reviewed by Ezra Haber Glenn, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Though the dynamics of gentrification, migration, disinvestment, and urban renewal can be understood at the level of the entire city (or higher), the impacts of these forces are felt much more immediately at the neighborhood scale. Taking us down to the street to witness how market pressures and political strategies unfold—and the ways neighborhood actors can resist or shape change—is the subject of *Rabble Rousers*, a new documentary about New York's historic Cooper Square.



The film is directed by Kathryn Barnier, Ryan Joseph, and Kelly Anderson, a team with deep documentary experience exploring urban planning themes. Barnier's past credits include editing work on *Detroit 48202: Conversations Along a Postal Route* (2018) and *Banished: How Whites Drove Blacks Out of Town in America* (2007). She and Anderson previously collaborated on *My Brooklyn* (2012), a deeply personal gentrification narrative. And Joseph's 2013 *The Rink*, which was recognized in Newark's Black Film Festival, celebrated a lost chapter of urban history. The team also included original research conducted by Dave Powell, an urban planner active in housing, community development, and cultural development in New York.

To explore the dynamics of urban planning and neighborhood opposition, the filmmakers zero in on Cooper Square, a dozen city blocks nestled at the western edge of New York's historic Lower East Side. Crammed between 2nd Avenue and the Bowery, the area once housed more than 2,400 families, generations of immigrants, struggling workers, and artists who found low-rent tenement housing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The film includes some wonderful visual material conveying the vibrant diversity of the setting: Storefronts emblazoned with signs in dozens of languages, crowded sidewalks and bustling streets, cramped stoops and fire escapes, artist lofts and ethnic festivals, and the requisite shots of kids splashing at open hydrants all bring the neighborhood alive, so

we actually care about this spot of land and the people who lived there and made it special.

Starting in 1959, Cooper Square was targeted by Robert Moses and the city's Slum Clearance Committee for urban renewal and the never-realized construction of the Lower Manhattan Expressway. Of course, this tale has been told many times before, typically highlighting the "Jacobs versus Moses" dynamic: Brave Jane takes on Bob the Bully, or some variation. Here we encounter Jacobs as well, but only in the background: The real hero is Frances Goldin, a resident of Cooper Square and co-founder of the Cooper Square Committee (CSC). Between the wars, Goldin—a working-class Jew from Queens—fell in love, joined the Communist Party, moved to the Lower East Side, and became active in local politics. She ran (unsuccessfully) for the State Senate, but this early experience only whetted her appetite for more organizing and political engagement. Working across town to fight the city's urban renewal plan for Lincoln Center, she learned vital skills that she'd use when Moses next turned his attention to Cooper Square.

Despite the title of the film, which emphasizes the ornery and combative nature of Goldin's strategy, the real lesson here is more subtle, and more profound: Communities are stronger—and more successful at preserving what they value—when they work to *shape* redevelopment rather than simply opposing it. Starting in the 1960s the CSC hired their own professional planner, Walter Thabit, as they endeavored to shape and promote their own vision for redevelopment. The resulting "Alternate Plan for Cooper Square" proposed a thoughtful and realistic strategy to preserve the better tenements, improve the substandard *old law* ones, create new public housing and amenities for the neighborhood, and—importantly—phase the project to minimize displacement. Confronting outside experts and planning agencies, Goldin and other local advocates proclaimed their own expertise: "Don't tell us, we'll tell you."

From these beginnings and partial victories (Moses's plan was stopped, but the CSC vision stalled as well: After winning over City Hall, the plan foundered due to Nixon-era funding cuts), Goldin and the CSC continued for 60-plus years, working to steer government agencies, fend off greedy speculators, and control (but not ignore) market forces to reshape their little corner of the city. As Goldin explains, "A community can save itself—not to make a buck, but to pay our bills."

The film's most recent chapter—and the CSC's most lasting impact—was the adoption of a community land trust model to redevelop housing while retaining community ownership. In 2013 the vision of permanent,

community-controlled affordable housing was realized in the form of a 21-building project. The film includes a useful case study and primer on this approach, which would be useful for training tenant organizers or even in a class on innovative tools for housing and affordability.

Unfortunately, the film dotes a bit too much on the main subject, but this is understandable: Goldin is charming and spunky, dedicated and tireless, always smiling, wearing purple, and dancing through the revolution. Interviews with New York-based scholars, including City University of New York's Tom Angotti and Frances Fox Piven, provide context, but the discussion is more celebratory than critical, resulting in a relatively one-sided history: a David-and-Goliath tale of community organizers, immigrants, and artists standing up against the assembled evils of greedy speculators, negligent slumlords, displacing gentrifiers, and scheming urban planners, led by Moses and supported by capitalism, City Hall, and even the FBI.

The filmmakers include voices from other organizers and tenants, sharing the spotlight with the fuller

cast of characters who powered this movement, but the treatment is more *supporting cast* rather than *ensemble*. Of course, it can be difficult to be inclusive in a 90-min documentary, and it's easier to market a personal story. Regardless, the focus on Goldin helps insert another Jacobs-level hero into planning history: Perhaps additional films and books will continue to diversify this canon by showcasing others, such as Evelina López Antonetty in the Bronx, Frances Batson in Nyack, or Mel King in Boston's South End.

EZRA HABER GLENN is a lecturer in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Department of Urban Studies & Planning, where he co-chairs the department's MCP committee and teaches urban history, thesis prep, and a special subject in "The City in Film." He is a member of the Boston Society of Film Critics and the regular film reviewer for APA's *Planning Magazine*.

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