

Book Review

Lucy Delap

Feminisms: A Global History

Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2020

Reviewed by Eleanor D. Glor

For me, this book was both impressive and a disappointment. It did not fulfill my hopes and expectations that it would be a history of feminism and global in its perspective, as its title suggests. Nonetheless, it was impressive in other ways, such as the comprehensiveness of the issues it covered and its feeling for some of the issues.

Like many book titles, its title does not reflect accurately what the book is about. It is not a history of feminism as the reader would expect it to be, especially from a historian (at Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge, UK). Its emphasis is tactics—the ways feminists used to get attention. Very little is substantive—about what feminists were trying to achieve. At minimum, I would therefore have been inclined to call it a social history rather than a history. Revealingly, its eight chapters are called dreams, ideas, spaces, objects, looks, feelings, actions and songs. I would have expected such emphases to come from a male critic rather than a female historian. The book has no analytic framework nor does Dr. Delap explain why she took the approach she did, why this was the best or at least a good approach and why these were the most important issues. Dr. Delap is a substantial scholar: I would have wished to hear her rationale. The book is purely descriptive.

The claim that it is a global history is overblown. While it very briefly discusses broadly-defined feminisms in the USA, UK, Germany, France, Japan, Iran, the Philippines, India, Argentina and Brazil, Dr. Delap does not discuss them in much detail and misses out many feminist movements, such as that in Canada. She only mentions Canada negatively, for challenges within the movement. As with many issues, such as the lack of general representativeness of women, she is imposing modern criticisms that were unreasonable to expect at the time.

Delap makes much of these weaknesses within the movement, such as the reluctance of the USA suffrage movement to include Black women, and makes little of Black women having suffrage organizations. Granted, this 100-year long effort interacted with the racial history of its country, but more is made of feminism's internal challenges than of its eventual successes. In the USA the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1870, extended voting rights to men of all races, although this was clawed back in various ways for Black men in subsequent years. Little is made of USA feminism's securing of the vote for all men, including Blacks, when it finally secured the vote for all women, including Black women, through the Nineteenth Amendment, ratified in 1920 (because states continued to have literacy tests and poll taxes,

most Black women (and men) would wait nearly five decades more to actually exercise that right, when the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed). In Canada the vote was also not extended to First Nations living on reserve without giving up their Treaty Rights until 1960. In the USA, because the Constitution left it up to the states to decide who has the right to vote, voting rights were not universal until the Voting Rights Act and subsequent legislation in 1970, 1975, and 1982. Nonetheless, there has been backtracking. While the women's suffrage movement was not fully inclusive, it secured a constitutional amendment that was near-inclusive. In Canada, the vote in national elections was secured in 1918 for all people, or at least, it was granted on the same basis as for men. Certain races and status were excluded from voting in federal elections prior to 1960—First Nations living on reserve and prisoners. Provincial votes were secured over a longer time frame, the last being the vote and the right to run for office for women in the Province of Quebec in 1940. In both the USA and Canada, prairie states and provinces extended the vote to women first. The first Canadian province was Manitoba, followed shortly thereafter by the other prairie provinces, Saskatchewan and Alberta, all in 1916.

Delap's discussion of feminism's interactions with other local movements in, for example, France (Proudhonism), Iran (Islam), Peru (miners' strike), the Philippines (nationalism) and Japan (women's foot binding) are interesting but raised questions about what her definition of feminism is.

Delap says:

All who challenge the wrongs faced by women have approached it in ways deeply shaped by their own historical moment. Their ability to name themselves—as feminists, women, ladies or sisters—is always provisional. Their politics have been organized around divides of class, caste, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, nationality and age. No naming of an individual as feminist can be taken for granted. Nor can we impose 'feminism' as a label onto the activism of women and men who would not have recognized it, or who actively rejected it... We can use 'feminism' as an entry point to understand better how campaigns over 'women's rights', 'new womanhood', 'the awakening of women' or 'women's liberation' might have shared concerns and tactics. But I will also be telling the story of the limits of feminism, its blind spots and silencing, its specificities and complicities. Even the idea of 'women'.... This book traces out how feminists and activist women related to nationalism, religious doctrines, imperialism, utopianism and racial thinking. My aim is to offer feminist inspiration... unexpected linkages.... conflicts and tensions.... Feminist coalitions.... had their limits and feminist concerns of the past don't always mesh easily with urgent contemporary efforts to make visible and stamp out the injuries of gender (pp. 2-3).

The definition of feminism she offers is "Feminism is best understood as an overlapping, internally complex set of actions, questions and demands that has been in formulation since the eighteenth century or even earlier. Its concerns change over time" (p. 3).

I wish she had explored this more.

Delap thus includes in her book an overview—a long history, a wide range of countries and a very wide range of social issues under the rubric of feminism. This allows for comparison of many women’s activities but does not allow for detailed discussion of any of them. Despite this breadth, I do not agree that it includes a global perspective because too much was missed. Perhaps a better term would have been “international”. Some of the comparisons she makes are quite interesting, such as the comparisons of the interests of middle class and working-class women, but she is critical of the fact that the voters’ rights movement was composed mainly of middle class and white women, especially in the USA. The author does reveal the impact of the Black women’s voters’ rights organizations on voters’ rights (Jones, 2020). Again, doing so takes the movements out of their historical context and judges them with today’s values and concerns. While the modern concerns are legitimate, imposing them on a movement one hundred years ago seems questionable to me. Since the suffragette’s strategies were eventually successful, I would be inclined to conclude that they understood their society.

The author highlights bell hooks’ observation that the feminist movement in the west has assumed that resisting patriarchal domination is more legitimate than resisting racism and other forms of domination (pp. 93-94). She also pays attention to the ways in which women in developing countries, whom she calls feminists, have focused on dealing with their own issues such as foot binding and securing better working conditions, often for their husbands, rather than targeting the fundamental patriarchy that might be seen lurking behind these problems. My reaction is that all of these issues need attention and it’s good that women are trying to do so. That they do not always support each others’ issues is not unique to feminism; rather, it is a problem found in many progressive movements. It is partly a result of a lack of time and energy to work on more than one or two issues at once. Rather than be critical, I am inclined to thank every feminist for her work.

Unfortunately, the reader does not come away from this book with a feeling for what feminism accomplished. While the breadth of topics is wide, for me, too much space is devoted to things that do not matter much, like what feminists wore, their songs and their disagreements. The book does not spotlight or communicate accomplishments. Based on the amount of space devoted to the issue, the author seems to believe that the sexuality of the movements’ members mattered more than their securing for all women the right to vote, to sit as members in decision-making organizations, including parliaments, to control their own finances and to work in well-paid jobs. Women’s right to independence, in my opinion, is more important than who they loved, what they dreamt, felt, wore, sang, or their actions.

While feminist movements faced many challenges that have not been solved, including unequal pay for women, their movement’s internal challenges and strategies were not the most important thing about them. They had challenges—all movements have challenges—creating coalitions. The external challenges from men and institutions were the most important and impactful and there have been backlashes, but these are not discussed. The brave feminists eventually overcame many of their movements’ challenges. They certainly did not fully overcome many men’s attitudes to women and, unfortunately, those attitudes are in some ways reflected in the topics the author chose to highlight. A hundred years ago, society and especially men, but not only men, imposed on women ideas about women’s dreams, ideas, appropriate spaces, appropriate interests, looks and appropriate feelings. In many contexts they

still do today. Why the author would choose to organize her book along those patriarchal lines escapes me.

On the other hand, this book has strengths. It is comprehensive in a certain kind of way. The author is not very interested in the efforts and successes/failures of women's movements. Rather, she focuses on who they were and, in my opinion, on the issues the male-run media imposed on them. There isn't much evidence that the author did primary research for this book nor a comprehensive literature search. Her sources for the movements are secondary—other people's books—and she limits herself to a few. She is interested in the people of the movement, mentioning many but providing little information on them. A question left unanswered is "What were the motivations of these women and why were they willing to endure the shaming and violence they encountered? Why did so many men and institutions violently resist their efforts, including the right to vote in the United Kingdom and the right to abortion in the USA and Canada? These women are heroes for much of humanity. Given this, why is criticism of them the main tack of the book and an appropriate approach? This is not explained. The book title says it is a history but I would say it is a criticism.

I had to read most of the book before I came across a chapter that really engaged and interested me. This was the last chapter, on songs, and mostly the discussion of the only movement Dr. Delap discusses in any depth, the Greenham (women's) Peace Camp in the UK. Oddly enough, the chapters on objects and songs are the only ones where she discusses it. In the songs chapter she uses the term "usable past", implying the rest is somehow not usable. She does not explain what this means to her nor why this is an appropriate measure. Finally, however, it becomes clear that the author's approach might be the communications/propaganda approach that connects emotionally with the reader, using the senses—sight, touch, smell, taste and hearing. There is no discussion of why these are the most important issues for feminism.

In the chapter on songs, however, she finally uses some hard, appropriate words, besides "police brutality":

As music became increasingly commercialized and marketed, the music industry's tendency to appropriate women's creative energies, to control their artistic choices and to sexually objectify their presentation to audiences became an area of feminist concern....the wider culture of the American-dominated music industry [was one] where mostly male executives and powerful companies profited from songs that glorified heterosexual romance and patriarchal authority (pp. 308-309).

The book would have benefitted from more analysis and also more evidence.

Another positive aspect of this book is the small physical size of the hard copy, that can be easily toted about while reading it, but the publisher still restricted its length to a rather limited—given such a broad topic—350 pages.

About the Author:

Eleanor D. Glor is Editor-in-Chief and Founding Publisher of *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal (TIJ)* (www.innovation.cc) and Fellow, McLaughlin

College, York University, Toronto, Canada. As a practitioner, she worked for the Government of Canada, two Canadian provincial governments, a regional municipality and a city. Eleanor has published about innovation conceptually and in the areas of aging, rehabilitation, public health, aboriginal health, the Province of Saskatchewan and other Canadian innovations. She has published seven books, five chapters and 45 peer-reviewed articles. She is interested in public sector innovation from an organizational, especially a public service perspective. Eleanor published five articles on the innovations of the Government of Saskatchewan in *TIJ*, Volume 28(1), 2023. Email address: glor@magma.ca

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