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Questions

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TRACING THE HISTORY OF FEMINISMS: METHODS, MEANINGS, AND QUESTIONS

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SARAH COLVIN and KATHARINA KARCHER (eds.), *Women, Global Protest Movements, and Political Agency: Rethinking the Legacy of 1968*, Routledge Studies in Gender and Global Politics (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 206 pp. ISBN 978 0 815 38472 4 (hardback), £96.00; ISBN 978 0 367 47182 8 (paperback), £29.59

ZSÓFIA LÓRÁND, *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia*, *Genders and Sexualities in History* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) xxii + 270 pp. ISBN 978 3 319 78222 5. £79.99 (hardback); ISBN 978 3 030 08647 3 (paperback), £54.99

TIFFANY N. FLORVIL, *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement*, *Black Internationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 308 pp. ISBN 978 0 252 04351 2 (hardback), \$US 110.00; ISBN 978 0 252 08541 3 (paperback), \$26.95

LUCY DELAP, *Feminisms: A Global History* (London: Pelican Books, 2020), 416 pp. ISBN 978 0 241 39814 2 (hardback), £20.00; ISBN 978 0 141 98598 5 (paperback), £10.99

The past twenty years have seen the growth of self-described ‘histories of feminism’. An offshoot of women’s and gender history, the history of feminism explores the diverse meanings and practices of activism against gender injustice. It looks at how women—and sometimes men—have advocated for equal rights, and how issues of equality have been understood and addressed over time. It examines the relationships between activists, the state, and society, and has revealed the ways in which feminism, and the women’s movement more generally, has acted as a source of hope for change as well as division and alienation. In doing so, the history of feminism has drawn attention to the intersections of marginalization, the interconnectedness of social movements, and the ways in which theory has been put into practice.

The history of feminism has proven to be an incredibly dynamic field of study. It is strongly interdisciplinary and theoretically

engaged, and although often informed by methodologies drawn from social and cultural history, it is intensely political. Indeed, by examining feminism and feminist claims, historians are necessarily challenging what is considered 'political' and what political history is. Karen Offen has succinctly captured this:

the history of feminism is a gendered narrative of political history that goes well beyond the adding and stirring in of an occasional queen, a comment on 'new woman' fashion, or a photograph of a demonstration for the right to vote. It necessarily expands the very meaning of 'political' and of what constitutes 'politics'.¹

Taking feminism and gender inequality seriously, then, requires scholars to rethink the historical discipline. Whether it is by questioning historical periodizations, the significance of national boundaries, or even the meaning of 'political', the history of feminism necessarily expands and challenges historical categories.

But there are some fundamental issues facing historians of feminism. Most basically, what is feminism? At first glance, this may seem self-evident, but it soon proves illusory. The meaning of feminism has evolved over time; what was feminist in the eighteenth century may not register as such today, and vice versa. Moreover, what is 'feminist' in one geographical context may not be considered as such in a different country, region, or even locality. It is more accurate to speak of the history of feminisms, rather than to maintain the appearance of a unitary feminist practice over time and space.

We might also ask what makes someone a feminist. Is it enough to campaign for women's rights, or does there have to be a positive identification with the label? Much like the definition of feminism, the label 'feminist' assumes an imagined unity or sisterhood between women. Yet women's inequality is entangled with other forms of oppression and structures of power, including colonialism, capitalism,

¹ Karen Offen, 'The History of Feminism is Political History', *Perspectives on History*, 1 May 2011, at [<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2011/the-history-of-feminism-is-political-history>], accessed 11 Dec. 2021.

racism, homophobia, and ableism.² As postcolonial and Black feminist scholars have shown, much of feminist thought and practice has been built on supposedly universal emancipatory politics and the experiences of White, middle-class, Western women, and pressed into the service of colonial and racialized ‘civilizing’ missions. Indeed, feminism has long been deeply implicated in maintaining hegemonic power structures that have marginalized, divided, violated, and even killed. This has not only limited the power of global sisterhood but, as Lucy Delap has argued in *Feminisims*, has meant that while for some ‘feminism has proved a transformative, explosive, life changing way of seeing the world. For others, it has elicited responses of visceral repudiation, laughter, ambivalence and irony’ (pp. 8–9).

Part of the historian’s task, then, is to unpack the manifold meanings of feminisms and women’s emancipation across time and space, while also attending to the privileges, divisions, and marginalization on which feminism has been built and perpetuated. But precisely how to do this is a key challenge for the historian of feminism. Although feminisms emerged out of and in response to local and national contexts, thanks to the growth of communications technologies across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even these local movements spoke to global and transnational developments. This task is all the more important given the ways in which older histories of feminism have centred European and North American developments at the expense of histories of feminisms from the Global South and from the geographical and social margins of European and North American society. Situating national and local histories within a global and transnational setting goes some way towards addressing these imbalances. But how exactly do we knit together local specificities in a global context, especially when the histories of women – in particular Women of Colour, working-class women, women with disabilities, lesbians, and women from colonized countries – are often not found within state or even activist archives?

This article reviews four recent contributions to the history of feminisms. The books featured examine the history of feminism from

² Kimberle Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color’, *Stanford Law Review*, 43/6 (1991), 1241–99.

the eighteenth century to the present, although there is a considerable emphasis on women's activism in the period from the late 1960s to the 1990s (often referred to as the 'second wave'). Each book in its own way responds to the conceptual and methodological questions at the heart of the history of feminism, and offers readers new approaches and questions in order to overcome these issues.

The volume *Women, Global Protest Movements, and Political Agency*, edited by Sarah Colvin and Katharina Karcher, centres on the watershed year of 1968. Published for the fiftieth anniversary of that revolutionary year, the book is one of a pair of volumes which re-examine the legacies and histories of 1968 through the lens of gender. The first volume – reviewed here – centres on the themes of gender and cultural memory, and the intersection of gender and violence. The second volume focuses exclusively on violence, in particular the relationship between violence and ideas of liberation and emancipation that proliferated among leftist and revolutionary protest movements in the late 1960s and 1970s. With diverse interdisciplinary approaches and a wide selection of case studies, the two volumes make a significant historical and historiographical intervention into the history of 1968.

While not centrally focused on feminism, the first volume's ten chapters broadly explore the relationships between 1968, women's activism, and the contestation of gender roles in different geographical and historical contexts. In doing so, they query the significance of the global protest movements that emerged in the late 1960s for women's rights discourses and practices. Although often described as a 'failure', 1968 has been interpreted by historians as a key turning point for liberal social and cultural change. In particular, the emergence of social movements – for example, feminism, environmentalism, gay rights – have all been linked to the transformations brought about by 1968 and are frequently presented as the productive legacy of an otherwise failed revolution.

But as this volume reveals, this is a narrative in need of revision. Across the book's various contributions, the male-dominated history of 1968 is thoroughly challenged, with several chapters highlighting the active roles women played throughout 1968 as they took part in even the most militant and violent of actions. It further questions the

very meaning of 1968 for women: not only were the transformations of gender roles often uneven or short-lived, but the volume also asks how important 1968 was for the 'emergence' of the global women's movements in the 1970s. In this way, by analysing the intersection of gender and late 1960s protest movements, the book decentres 1968 as a marker of (Western) liberal transformation, and instead explores the limits and meanings of the change it produced. As Colvin and Karcher state, 'rather than portraying the decades since 1968 as a global history of progress towards gender equality, the essays collected here consciously draw a complex, dynamic, and, at least in part, contradictory picture of women's involvement in transnational protest movements' (p. 11).

Feminism and women's movements are naturally key parts of this history of gender equality and social protest. Alongside the book's findings on gender and 1968, it also reveals several core issues facing historians of feminism. The chapters by Kristina Schulz, Andrea Hajek, Chris Reynolds, Christina Gerhardt, Zsófia Lóránd, and Clare Bielby address the history of feminism and women's activism most directly. The contributions by Schulz, Hajek, and Reynolds in particular raise important questions about the meaning of 1968 for the history (and historiography) of feminisms. This is especially clear in the chapter by Schulz, who examines the 'symbolic significance of "1968"' to the histories of women's movements in West Germany and France (p. 19). In West Germany, for example, Schulz juxtaposes two narratives: one that places the emergence of the new women's movement in 1971 as a result of the campaign to decriminalize abortion, and another that places the birth of the movement in 1968. A similar division is also to be found in the French case, where one narrative emphasizes the significance of 1968 and the other downplays its importance. In both the French and West German cases, Schulz connects these competing trajectories to key figures within feminism, namely Antoinette Fouque and Christine Delphy in France, and Alice Schwarzer and Helke Sander in West Germany.

As Schulz shows, these different histories are not mere curiosities. Instead, she argues that the debate over 1968 forms 'part of a symbolic struggle around the legitimation, aims, and means of a social movement, and thus about feminism itself' (p. 29). In other words, how

an actor views 1968 and its relationship to the women's movement shapes how they understand the very purpose and task of feminism. A similar argument is made by both Reynolds and Hajek, who ask whether 1968 was really so important after all. While Reynolds argues that 1968 provided a 'negative catalyst' for feminism in Northern Ireland, as women coalesced against the gendered hierarchies of the 1968 movement, Hajek poses a much more fundamental question about tracing the history of feminism. Indeed, for Hajek, centring 1968 as a key moment in the development of feminism means that women's activism is seen only as 'something that flowed out of the 1968 movement, rather than as a phenomenon in and of itself' (p. 33). Adopting this approach, Hajek examines the history of Italian feminism, and argues that the emergence of the women's movement in the late 1960s was largely the result of responses to earlier forms of organizing and the reluctance of these pre-existing women's associations to take issues of reproduction, sexuality, and gender oppression seriously.

Together, these chapters reveal how the history of feminism has been shaped by historicization efforts. Whether we understand 1968 as a key moment for women's rights or not, mapping a trajectory and a history for feminism is also an act of agenda-setting that frames understandings of what feminism is and how it should be practised. As Schulz's chapter suggests, this is something feminists have invested in to cement their vision of the struggle for women's rights.³ Exploring these historicization processes, then, is not only integral to understanding the different meanings and practices of feminism but, as Hajek shows, is also a part of questioning the centres and peripheries of the histories we tell.

The issue of centre and periphery – in the geographical sense – is a core theme throughout *Women, Global Protest Movements, and Political Agency*, with several chapters arguing for a global approach to 1968 that shifts attention away from (Western) European and North American experiences. While Reynolds argues for the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the history of 1968 (a country whose involvement is often overshadowed by the 'Troubles' of the 1970s), Jennifer Philippa

³ See also Lisa Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848–1898* (Chapel Hill, 2014).

Eggert examines the situation in Lebanon, and Claudia Derichs explores Japan and South-East Asia. These chapters reveal a complex picture of feminism and women's activism across borders, one that speaks both to national contexts and global discussions of feminism and women's rights.

Zsófia Lóránd's chapter, and her monograph *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia*, pick up this issue as she traces the development of 'new Yugoslav feminism' from the late 1960s to 1990. Drawing on methods from intellectual history, alongside twenty oral history interviews together with archival and media sources, Lóránd presents a detailed history of the emergence and growth of feminism in Yugoslavia. In a field that is often overshadowed by the legacies and work of 'Western' feminism and Cold War binaries, Lóránd's study provides an important and welcome intervention. Her book reveals the unique expression of feminism in Yugoslavia, and in doing so helps to nuance the history of both life under state socialism and feminism itself.

In many ways, the story of new Yugoslav feminism will be familiar to readers. Disappointed at the failure of late 1960s activism to take women's voices seriously and frustrated at the inequalities they faced in daily life, women in Yugoslavia began talking. In cafés, pubs, and around kitchen tables, women in Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Zagreb read and discussed feminist texts. With time they formed groups at universities, invited speakers, developed publications, and organized major events. As Lóránd puts it, their work transitioned from grass-roots 'academic work, the arts and literature' to activism with a mass audience (p. 2). What makes this story unique, however, is the socialist context, and the way it shaped the practice and politics of feminism in Yugoslavia, and the relationship between feminists, the state, and the broader dissident movement.

In Yugoslavia, as in many socialist states, men and women were officially equal. The socialist regime encouraged women to obtain an education and pursue a career alongside motherhood. In return, women were provided with services that enabled them to combine motherhood with paid employment, and had access to abortion. The centrality of equality to socialist state-making meant that feminism was not only deemed unnecessary, as men and women were already

equal, but was considered a Western, bourgeois ideology. Ironically, it was these overstated claims of equality that led women in Yugoslavia to feminism. As Lóránd writes, ‘women were puzzled by the contradiction between the promise of the regime and their own experience of their “emancipation”’ (p. 3).

It was this realization that drove a small number of ‘intellectual women’ in the late 1960s and early 1970s to turn to feminism. Based primarily in Zagreb and Belgrade (and later Ljubljana), it was at the universities that feminism first emerged within the student population. Universities, student centres, and student associations proved to be key sites for the early formation of feminism in Yugoslavia. They provided not only for the practical needs of the growing movement—physical spaces for students and professors to meet, and access to resources—but also the intellectual space for the development of a uniquely Yugoslav feminism. From within the university young feminists had access to foreign literature and publishing channels, and they could hold guest lectures and conferences, all of which enabled them to develop their own politics.

This is one of the most important interventions made in the book: Lóránd shows how the new Yugoslav feminists developed their own feminism. This was no simple transposition of a ‘Western’ feminist movement. Although many of the feminists she studies had connections with Western Europe and read key feminist texts by the likes of Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer, they combined this with Marxist thought, attention to the lives and activism of women in Latin America and Asia, and even with Indian philosophy. This intellectual engagement was then used by the women to query their own lives under socialism, even leading them to reconceptualize central feminist (and socialist) terms, such as ‘consciousness, women’s universal experience, patriarchy, family, work’ (pp. 30–1).

What also made new Yugoslav feminism unique was its relationship to dissidence and the Yugoslav state. In this, Lóránd moves the scholarship on the Communist bloc away from a binary of the state against the people. New Yugoslav feminists both criticized the state’s exaggerated claims of women’s equality and attempted to speak to the regime and engage it in their critique. In making this argument, Lóránd shows that dissidence in Yugoslavia—especially when it came to

feminism — had multiple meanings and expressions. She also suggests that the closeness of feminists to the regime, alongside the centrality of women's equality to state socialism, is one of the reasons why liberal and national dissident groups marginalized feminists during the transition from socialism. Although the book ends in 1990, this points to the importance of feminist legacies to the post-socialist transition in Yugoslavia and the former Communist bloc more broadly.

The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia most fundamentally reveals how the history of feminisms requires a 'reconsideration of our categories of post-WWII history' (p. 228). Dissidence, 'Western', 'Eastern', and even feminist are all complicated by paying attention to the trajectory of Yugoslav feminism. Despite studying a very different social and historical context, Tiffany N. Florvil's *Mobilizing Black Germany* similarly shows how centring Black women's activism challenges notions of race, the nation, and belonging in late twentieth-century Germany. Indeed, the two books show remarkable similarities: both highlight the importance of knowledge transfer, mobility, and higher education to the evolution of social movements, and both reveal the importance of language production, naming, and agency to understanding women's activism.

But whereas Lóránd focuses on feminism and the Yugoslav women's movement, Florvil examines Black German women's involvement in the formation and development of the modern Black German movement. As Florvil shows, women like May Ayim and Katharina Oguntoye were pivotal in shaping the contours of the movement. Working with other Black German women and men, and often in collaboration with People of Colour and other Black communities in Germany and Europe, they participated in a transnational feminist diasporic movement. In the process of tracing this movement, Florvil's book — perhaps more than any of the others reviewed here — shows the expansiveness of feminism. She moves the study beyond issues typically associated with women's rights, such as violence, abortion, and sexuality, and instead reveals how straight and lesbian Black German women worked together to forge a movement that spanned Germany, Europe, and the Atlantic. They worked with other racialized communities, multicultural feminist groups, and human rights organizations. And most importantly, they challenged both racial and

gender inequalities and contested their erasure from the nation, and in doing so, broadened notions of belonging and Germanness.

In making this argument, Florvil makes two key interventions. First, she shows the importance of race and Women of Colour for the post-war development of Germany. Although race has featured as a central element in the history of Germany before 1945, in the study of the post-war era it has remained on the periphery of the scholarship.⁴ This is similarly the case in the study of feminism in German history, which has centred on the activism of the predominantly White ‘new women’s movement’ of the early 1970s. Indeed, some of the activists Florvil studies were already active in the new women’s movement, but found themselves alienated and their attempts to discuss race ignored by their White ‘sisters’. Experiences like these, alongside everyday racism and sexism, prompted Black German women to approach racial and gender inequalities as inextricably related in their work in the Black German movement of the 1980s. By highlighting this introduction of Black feminism and intersectional feminist theory into Germany, Florvil reveals the importance of the 1980s as a pivotal moment for the rethinking of both race and feminism in Germany.

Second, Florvil intervenes in the work on Black internationalism and the Black diasporic movement. This scholarship has predominantly focused on the work of men, and has failed to consider Germany as a centre for Black internationalist thought and diasporic activism due to its short-lived colonial empire. In contrast, Florvil shows the pivotal role women played in the intellectual development of the Black German movement and the way in which their intellectual, creative, and activist work has contributed to the Black diasporic movement in Europe and globally by broadening discussions and notions of race, gender, citizenship, and belonging.

⁴ Exceptions include: Lauren Stokes, ‘“An Invasion of Guest Worker Children”: Welfare Reform and the Stigmatisation of Family Migration in West Germany’, *Contemporary European History*, 28/3 (2019), 372–89; Jennifer A. Miller, *Turkish Guest Workers in Germany: Hidden Lives and Contested Borders, 1960s to 1980s* (Toronto, 2018); Rita Chin, Heide Fehrenbach, Geoff Eley, and Atina Grossmann, *After the Nazi Racial State: Difference and Democracy in Germany and Europe* (Ann Arbor, 2009); Maria Höhn, *GIs and Fräuleins: The German–American Encounter in 1950s West Germany* (Chapel Hill, 2002).

With these contributions, Florvil's book is a model for an expansive history of feminism. Feminism was but one part of the political and intellectual work of the women Florvil studies. Their activism cut across and sought to address overlapping forms of marginalization, which Florvil expertly details. *Mobilizing Black Germany* shows that the work of Black German women cannot be ignored if historians want to trace changing understandings of gender and racial inequality in Germany and Europe.

A similarly expansive view of feminism is presented in Lucy Delap's *Feminisms: A Global History*. The most programmatic book of this selection, Delap lays out the conceptual, methodological, and political complexities of writing a global history of feminism from the eighteenth century to the present. Indeed, the book serves as a road map for navigating the many challenges in writing such a broad history.

One issue Delap identifies is the fluid and contested meaning of feminism across time and space. Feminism has had many meanings over time, and has been a source of debate and contestation. Although women and men have worked to address gender injustice (a term Delap explicitly uses to shift discussion away from rights and equality), many have refused the label 'feminist'. Much like Lóránd, Delap underscores the importance of respecting the agency of historical actors to identify (or not) as feminists. The act of naming and identifying is a political one, and the decision to work as a feminist says much about activist self-understandings, and about how feminism was perceived and practised historically. This attentiveness, however, creates difficulty for the historian wanting to bring together a diverse range of histories and activism; as Delap argues, 'it would be a mistake to simply look at all these debates and movements in isolation; they often shared key ideas or drew inspiration from each other's struggles' (p. 10). Instead, then, Delap uses 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' (pp. 2-3). As Delap shows, adopting this approach to the history of feminism enables the historian to bring together a broad historical and geographical range of actors, texts, movements, objects, ideas,

and even dreams, while also acknowledging the specific contexts of different feminisms.

Periodization and the imposition of a Western 'hegemonic feminism' (to borrow from Chela Sandoval) is another challenge highlighted by Delap.⁵ The history of feminism has typically been divided into a series of 'waves', most notably the 'first wave' of the late nineteenth century, when women fought for suffrage, and the 'second wave' of the late 1960s and 1970s, when feminism turned increasingly to issues of self-determination, violence against women, and reproductive rights. However, echoing Florvil, as many postcolonial feminists and Women of Colour have remarked, such a periodization obscures the activism and intellectual work of Women of Colour. It also presupposes a universal chronology of feminism based on White European and North American experiences, and in doing so ignores the existence and emergence of feminist movements outside this 'Western' timeline.

Delap side-steps this by approaching the history of feminism thematically. Across eight chapters devoted to dreams, ideas, spaces, objects, looks, feelings, actions, and songs, she explores how people have envisioned, made, felt, and practised feminism. Her writing artfully moves from different countries, individuals, and periods to paint a picture of the plurality of feminisms. She describes this approach as 'mosaic feminism' (p. 20). In one of the most important contributions made by the book, Delap calls for historians to see feminism as 'built up from inherited fragments but offering distinctive patterns and pictures. Like mosaics, the view from afar and the close reading of feminisms may give a very different picture' (p. 20). As the book shows, such an approach not only expands the history of feminism, but also reveals the cracks, divisions, and transformations of feminism over time.

As almost all the books reviewed here argue, feminism is not finished. Despite the fears of some scholars that we have moved into a 'post-feminist' world, there is still important work to be done. Whether #MeToo, #NiUnaMenos, global women's marches, Black Lives Matter, or the rise of right-wing populist parties and anti-gender movements, it is clear that the work of challenging gender injustice

⁵ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, 2000).

must continue. But as these books all show, this is also work that must take place within our scholarship. The reliance on universalist narratives based on the experiences of a privileged few are simply not enough—neither in terms of detailing the complexity of the past, nor to address the challenges of today.

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