

BOOK REVIEW

Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement

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Allison B. Wolf

Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia Email: allison.wolf10@gmail.com

Most traditional histories of feminism portray the United States and western Europe as its intellectual and political centers, at least during the twentieth century. But Katherine Marino forcefully challenges this narrative in her outstanding book, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement*. Marino aptly traces the history and development of *feminismo americano*—a feminism spearheaded by Latin American women, predominantly from Uruguay, Cuba, Panama, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico—to reveal how integral it was in creating a regional and international feminist movement. In particular, Marino demonstrates that between the two World Wars, Latin America was home to an active set of feminist movements, and it is the women of these movements who deserve the credit for ushering in the internationalization of women’s rights, creating the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and insisting that women’s rights be protected in the UN Charter. Consequently, says Marino, we must reassess our understanding of the history of feminism to understand that “Latin American feminisms not only thrived but, in fact, took the lead internationally . . . as innovators in global feminist thought and activism” (7).

Marino introduces readers to the main ideas, controversies, and developments of *feminismo americano* by taking them on a journey through the lives, relationships, collaborations, and disagreements among six of its central figures: Paulina Luisi (Uruguay), Bertha Lutz (Brazil), Clara González (Panama), Ofelia Domínguez Navarro (Cuba), Doris Stevens (United States), and Marta Vergara (Chile). We are hooked from the first page with Marino’s description of a major falling-out between Domínguez and Stevens: a schism illustrative of the main rifts between US and Latin American feminists. Stevens represented a typical US position that maintained that the primary focus of feminist action in the Americas should be advancing women’s suffrage and equal rights treaties, whereas Domínguez represented a more common Latin American position, which saw this vision of feminism as both too narrow—as she conceived of feminism as including broader fights for social and economic justice for working women and promoting the political and civil rights of all people who were “suffering under a dictatorship and under US imperialism” (2)—and as disconnected from local realities, arguing that such legal freedoms were practically meaningless under a dictatorship. These tensions over the nature of feminism in the Americas, its objectives, and who should lead it are ever-present themes in the book’s eight chapters.

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As Marino shows in the first chapter (which is focused on the relationship between the Brazilian Lutz and the Uruguayan Luisi), these disputes were not confined to US–Latin American interactions. To the contrary, they also existed among Latin American women in the region. For example, as Marino details, Lutz and Luisi’s early conflicts represented another ideological fissure, namely whether Pan American feminism should be led by Latin American, Spanish-speaking women (advocated by Luisi) or by Brazil and the United States (advocated by Lutz). As we go into the second chapter, which introduces us to González (Panama) and Navarro (Cuba), the arguments about who should lead Pan American feminism grew yet again, as both of these women advanced efforts to form a hemispheric feminism that both rejected the idea of US leadership and the idea of leadership from the ABC nations (Argentina, Brazil, and Chile). As citizens of US protectorates, both González and Domínguez saw feminism and anti-imperialism as integral parts of both Pan American feminism and their own nations’ fights for liberation from US imperial sovereignty. This required leadership from nations like their own, who experienced US imperialism viscerally and first-hand.

Of course, as these early chapters illustrate so well, it would be a mistake to assume that these philosophical disagreements led these women from throughout the Americas to see one another as adversaries. To the contrary, for example, both González and Domínguez formed friendships with Stevens, to advance their respective agendas. In fact, these three women worked together to demand an international agreement giving all women in the Western hemisphere civil and political rights and, in 1928, they spearheaded the creation of the first intergovernmental organization of women in the world: The Inter-American Commission of Women (IACW).

Despite these productive efforts, the fundamental disagreement endured about the nature of feminism in the Americas, its goals, and who should lead. As detailed in chapter 3, although González was very excited to begin work with Stevens at the IACW, it soon became clear that all of Stevens’s previous overtures (anti-imperialism, talk of empowering Latin American women, supporting local struggles) were simply lip service (69) to help achieve her goal of passing an equal rights treaty. Stevens zealously promoted her own agenda and worked against the Latin American feminist vision. She fiercely guarded her own leadership position, refused to allow major Latin American feminists whom she deemed threatening to be appointed to IACW, refused to fund the travel expenses for Latin American feminists to participate in the IACW’s work, and refused to embrace any of the Cuban feminist demands for social justice that centered the needs of working women or resisted US imperialism. Consequently, many Latin American members decided to create a new *feminismo práctico*, which would focus on achieving these objectives and muster transnational support for local struggles throughout Latin America, including those against state violence and dictatorships in their home nations.

Unsurprisingly, many of these Latin American feminists, led by Lutz and Domínguez, also set out to oust Stevens from the leadership of the IACW (which they still hoped could support their Pan American feminist goals with Stevens sidelined); the fourth and fifth chapters chronicle these efforts. Despite being united in their desire to cast Stevens out, though, familiar points of contention reemerged, with Lutz continuing to believe in a US and Brazilian superiority that entitled them to lead feminism in the Americas and Domínguez favoring Latin American, Spanish-speaking women’s leadership. By this point, though, other positions emerged, including Chilean Vergara’s project to promote a new Popular Front Pan American feminism led by Latin American feminists but that utilized US alliances, including with Stevens, when profitable.

Vergara and Stevens first met in 1930 at the Hague Codification Conference and had worked together at the IACW until 1933, when Vergara left, because, like others, she was frustrated with Stevens's leadership style, her denial of the problem of US imperialism, and her insistence on promoting a narrow agenda of equal rights treaties. Still, Vergara maintained an admiration for Stevens, and the two maintained what each saw as a mutually beneficial relationship—with Stevens thinking that Vergara could help her gain support for her agenda in Latin America, and Vergara thinking that the equal rights treaties that also incorporated larger social concerns could serve as instruments to blunt fascist attacks and promote her new Popular Front agenda, especially the *Movimiento Pro-Emancipación de las Mujeres de Chile* (MEMCh) that she founded in 1935.

Although shrewd political maneuvering and alliances with feminists like Vergara and Luisi enabled Stevens to maintain her leadership position at IACW for years, she could not fight the tide indefinitely. Marino chronicles in chapter 6 her eventual fall and the simultaneous rise of Popular Front Feminism based in Latin America. As Marino notes, Popular Front Feminism was gaining in the region at the same time that the US government (which saw Stevens as too right-wing, opposed to the New Deal agenda, and too close to fascist dictators) wanted her out. So they successfully combined efforts to take the reins of the IACW away from her. With Stevens marginalized, the seeds were planted to advance an intersectional and inclusive Latin American feminism that both propelled Popular Front Feminism and “an intersectional form of inter-American feminism—one that addressed racial equality as well as class and gender equality” (166).

The development of this feminism was stymied, though, as global events, in particular World War II, intervened to shift feminism in the Americas and push Latin American feminists to unite with the United States in opposition to fascism and for the promotion of human rights. As Marino puts it: “World War II moved Pan-American *feministas* of different political stripes to a similar position, one that sought inter-American solidarity against totalitarianism while upholding international commitments to women's rights as human rights” (172). As Marino deftly conveys in chapter 7, this unity was short-lived. With Stevens gone from the IACW, the US moved to replace a “women's rights” agenda with a “human rights” agenda, advanced goals that “promoted cooperation and increased connections between women in the US and Latin America,” rather than political and social action, and portrayed the feminism advocated by Latin American feminists as a “*passé* northern import” (176). By contrast, Latin American feminists promoted a broad understanding of human rights—which included extensive rights for women, such as maternity legislation, social and political rights, workers' rights, and the call to investigate women's unemployment and how to address the problems it would create once the war came to a close—and called for racial equality and anti-imperialism. These tensions came to a head in the creation of the UN Charter.

The eighth, and final, chapter describes the inner workings of the San Francisco conference to create the UN Charter, specifically how, despite intense US and British resistance, Latin American feminists successfully incorporated women's rights into it. In particular, Latin American feminists “helped establish ‘equal rights for men and women’ in the preamble and in the ‘purposes’ of the charter and a statement ensuring women equal representation in United Nations bodies” (199). Beyond that, Lutz and her allies were indispensable in creating the Commission on the Status of Women, a UN organ to study and make recommendations on women's rights that still exists

today. In essence, without the decades of work of Latin American feminists, the UN Charter would have contained little to nothing on women's rights.

The book concludes with a beautiful epilogue summarizing how each of the six women central to the narrative spent the rest of their days after 1945 and how they were, largely, written out of the history of feminism. Even though some of this historical erasure resulted from US feminists (like Virginia Gildersleeve) writing their own, often false, accounts of this time period, Marino notes that the Cold War (and how it maligned social welfare and social rights programs) also played a large part in relegating Pan American feminism to a forgotten role in history. Despite the explicit and implicit efforts to marginalize these women's core contributions to women's rights and feminism, though, we now know that they were critical.

Of course, this brief sketch barely conveys even the most basic details of these events compared to how Marino so masterfully curates and communicates them (although some points—especially those related to Stevens—are repeated more often than necessary). As a whole, this is an impressively researched, engaging, and groundbreaking book that changes how we understand both the history of feminism and the rightful place of Latin American feminists in it. I strongly recommend it to anyone interested in feminism—in the Americas and beyond.

Allison B. Wolf is the Director of Graduate Programs and an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia. Her research interests include feminist philosophy (in particular Latin American feminism, feminist epistemology, and feminist bioethics) and philosophy of immigration in the Americas. She is the author of *Just Immigration in the Americas: A Feminist Account* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), and co-editor of *Applying Jewish Ethics* (Lexington, 2022) with Jennifer Thompson and *Incarnating Feelings, Constructing Communities: Experiencing Emotions in the Americas through Education, Violence, and Public Policy* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020) with Catalina González Quintero and Ana María Forero Angel. Wolf is currently working on projects at the intersection of feminist philosophy and immigration in Colombia.