

INTRODUCTION

For the Many: A Review Dossier

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Abstract

This introduction to the review dossier on Dorothy Sue Cobble, *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality*, introduces the major themes of the work in light of Cobble's earlier interventions in gendering labor history and focus on laborite activist women here called "full rights feminists". It asks the contributors to expand on and decenter the transnational and global influence of Cobble's feminists and their views on capitalism and democracy in light of their own research. Among questions considered are: what do we gain from attention to the ideas and activism of low-income and immigrant women in our various histories? How do questions of race/white privilege, citizenship, empire, colonialism, and imperialism complicate understandings of equality and democracy? What is revealed by considering class in women's history?

"What's in a name?" asked the US historian of women Nancy F. Cott in 1989. "Words and categories are the tools we use to survey and map the terrain of women's past activism; they are our beacons, which can blind as well as illuminate", she noted.¹ Cott found that the then popular historiographical term, "social feminism", had become too capacious. Historians deployed it to label reforms advocated by women's organizations, both laborite and pro-business, and to refer to a range of initiatives that would enhance justice and lessen inequality but sometimes control the urban masses or uplift racial and ethnic "others". Instead, she would restrict the word "feminism" to those fighting for women's rights and self-determination.

Since the 1980s, Dorothy Sue Cobble has offered alternative definitions. She breathed new life into the old concept of social feminism by reframing such women as labor feminists.² She then extended the label of "social justice feminists", initially coined to speak of a US–German pre-WWI network, to activists after

¹Nancy F. Cott, "What's in a Name? The Limits of 'Social Feminism'; or, Expanding the Vocabulary of Women's History", *Journal of American History*, 76:3 (December 1989), pp. 809–829, quote at 811. See her still skeptical review of *For the Many*, "A Work in Progress", *The New York Review of Books*, 23 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/09/23/feminism-work-in-progress/>; last accessed 26 November 2021.

²Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ, 2004).

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suffrage.³ Now, with *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality* (hereafter *For the Many*), she calls her protagonists “full rights feminists”, upholders of the US version of social democracy that had its most robust success with the New Deal – the US version of the welfare state that nonetheless reinforced the family wage and racial exclusions. Along with their counterparts in Europe and, to a lesser extent, Asia and Latin America, they “were never fully at home in either the male-led labor movement or the elite-led women’s movement”, Cobble contends, finding the former “gender conservative” and blind to “sex-specific forms of class exploitation” and the latter limited by focusing on sex inequalities to the exclusion of class and race harms (p. 62).⁴

Cobble stands as one of the innovators in the field of Labor History, first engendering our understanding of unionism through work on waitresses and occupational unionism.⁵ She moved from analyzing women in unions to “the sex of class”.⁶ Simultaneously, she brought class into the study of feminism through analysis of working-class women across race and ethnicity and the organizations and leaders who advocated for them. With *For the Many*, she goes transnational with a comparative study of women whose own internationalism forged a social democratic vision of justice. In addressing questions of transnational connections and the international movement of people, thought, and praxis, Cobble joins the biographical trend in the writing of political history. She reminds us of the role of friendships and the personal in forging politics across class, race, and location, and how such relationships could facilitate or deter political initiatives. We learn of bonds forged through common purposes and the intimate relationships that further tied women to each other. She does not speculate how same-sex partnerships may have shaped programs for mothers and children, though such women were at the forefront of social change then – as many queer women and women of color in the US are now.

“Full-rights feminism” stood in opposition to legal equality feminism, just as the network associated with the National Women’s Trade Union League of America (WTUL) – the group at the center of her narrative – came to fight against Alice Paul’s National Woman’s Party (NWP). In 1923, Paul and her coterie formulated the Equal Rights Amendment. As Cobble explains, while the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) promised abstract equality, the league wanted “actual equality of liberty, status, and opportunity between men and women” (p. 123). For the WTUL and its allies, such as the National Consumers League and the Industrial Department of the Young Women’s Christian Association, equality required recognizing disadvantage from the sexual division of labor: women worldwide were

³Kathryn Kish Sklar, Susan Strasser, and Anja Schuler (eds), *Social Justice Feminists in the United States and Germany: A Dialogue in Documents, 1985–1933* (Ithaca, NY, 1998); Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women’s Movements* (New York, 2014), pp. 1–67.

⁴The page numbers cited in this and the following articles refer directly to the relevant pages in Dorothy Sue Cobble, *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality*.

⁵Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL, 1991).

⁶Dorothy Sue Cobble (ed.), *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership* (Ithaca, NY, 1993); *idem* (ed.), *The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor* (Ithaca, NY, 2007).

responsible for reproductive labor, the work that sustains daily life, and generational replenishment, whether paid or unpaid. By the 1930s, antagonism between US women spread from the national to the international when the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO) became terrains of struggle over equal rights, equal treatment, and women-only labor standards. The conflict between US women traveled to pan-American conferences and persisted with the organization of the United Nations (UN). Cobble observes that class, more than gender, divided feminists when it came to women-specific measures; social democratic, socialist, and laborite women “sought a way of accommodating sex differences and lifting living standards for all” (p. 199).

For the Many places this US feud within a bigger story. It contains an expansive cast of characters, some well-known and others known only through specialized studies. From the US, there are immigrant unionists, such as Rose Schneiderman, and their elite allies like Margaret Dreier Robins of the WTUL; Black club women educators, such as Mary McLeod Bethune, and Black unionists like Maida Springer and Dollie Lowther Robinson; labor reformers such as Women’s Bureau directors Frieda Miller and Esther Peterson; New Dealers like Frances Perkins; lawyers like Dorothy Kenyon and Pauli Murray, and social scientists such as Mary Van Kleeck and Mildred Fairchild (who became an ILO official). Interactions with their international counterparts widen the circle of women who influenced each other and sought economic and social justice. These include Britain’s Margaret Bondfield, Japan’s Taka Tanaka, Sweden’s Kerstin Hesselgren and Sigrid Ekendahl, German refugee Toni Sender, and India’s Ela Bhatt. There are ILO officials Marguerite Thibert from France and Ana Figueroa from Chile; leaders from the anti-communist International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), and the UN, including its Commission on the Status of Women. The full-rights feminists clashed with Latin American feminists cultivated by the NWP. They faced competition abroad from the Women’s International Democratic Federation, an organization of anti-fascist and anti-imperialist women often aligned with the Soviet Union. Cobble’s protagonists were often anti-communist but not “Cold Warriors”.

Divided into five sections, *For the Many* weaves together national and international stories, breaking through the false division of domestic policy from global encounters. Cobble begins with the early years of the WTUL and its generative role in the first International Conference of Working Women in Fall 1919, held to coincide with the ILO’s first International Labour Conference. The book continues with the fragmentations of the interwar years. Cobble questions the standard interpretation, which associates America with separate women’s organizations and Europe with class-based, mixed-sex ones. Women in both places struggled against class and gender inequalities. “In the end, an ‘America’ vs. ‘Europe’ story is blind to the common aims and dilemmas of labor women [...] in the 1920s”, she argues. “It is a parochial tale that impoverishes our histories and denies cross-border solidarities” (p. 98). It also leaves out attempted connections with women in Asia and Latin America. The full-rights feminists shined with the New Deal, when some of their labor and welfare agenda passed. They further pushed for a “women’s ‘New Deal for the World’” (p. 189) that would enhance social security, healthcare, and women’s job opportunities as well as labor protections. They would have considerable

impact on the post-WWII global labor standards regime, despite the challenges of the Cold War, winning equal remuneration and non-discrimination measures at the ILO and strengthening its maternity convention. While the equal pay instrument was to recognize the value of women's skills, the inclusion of sex in the non-discrimination one was an afterthought made possible by women delegates and staff. They were not always successful, as highlighted by the failure to extend labor standards to domestic workers and to stop the outsourcing of manufacturing to the home and from the Global North to the Global South.

The last section extends the story to the present. Cobble traces the ways that this network pushed for major initiatives in the 1960s, including the Equal Pay Act and the President's Commission on the Status of Women. She calls the 1960s "pivotal" insofar as the decade witnessed the emergence of a new feminism, along with other social movements, which broke with the full-rights past in more radical calls for shifts in gender relations. These movements would extend the earlier internationalist human-rights vision in new directions. Cobble admits that "Peterson's reluctance to challenge the sexual division of labor in the home and her embrace of part-time market work for women would soon seem backward and even antifeminist" (p. 364). Meanwhile, civil rights in the US and anti-colonial national liberation abroad, especially in Africa, brought questions of racial equality and development to the forefront. "New feminist internationalisms" (p. 381), forged in a series of UN conferences over the next decades, highlighted the question of violence in the home and between nations, under the slogan, "women's rights are human rights". Cobble updates adjustments at the ILO, ICFTU, and the UN, venues in which the new feminism from below and South-South movements pushed for a transformed international governance in the face of US hegemony and neoliberal roadblocks.

Full-rights feminists strove for the reorganization of "family responsibilities" and working time, which now appear as prefigurative, with Peterson transformed from an upholder of the sexual division of labor into an intersectional feminist. Indeed, the feminist carework network of the 2000s has updated their agenda, seen in proposals for paid family and medical leave, universal pre-school, child care funding and allowances, and resources for home and community-based services for the elderly and people with disabilities. Though intersectional feminist activists, like Ai-jen Poo and others associated with the National Domestic Workers Alliance and Caring Across the Generations, serve as major defenders of worker rights, taking up the mantle of full-rights feminists, they did not come directly out of organized labor. Only in the 2000s have trade unions begun to aid informal and legally excluded workers, responding to the push of such activists, who emerged from ethnic associations and feminist formations – a parallel (and contrast) with the WTUL worth exploring more fully.⁷ Ever the optimist, Cobble concludes with lessons learned that include the necessity of global engagement and democracy to counter capitalism and

⁷Eileen Boris, "Toward A New New Deal ... And the Women Will Lead", in Stacie Taranto and Leandra Zarnow (eds), *Suffrage at 100: Women in American Politics since 1920* (Baltimore, MD, 2020), pp. 414–433; Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the 21st Century* (Berkeley, CA, 2018).

the necessity of collective solutions. She ends with the plea: “Each of us is an Other. There is no place to hide, no utopia to be found. We only have each other” (p. 425).

For the Many is thus more than a culmination of Cobble’s recent thought; it is one of those protean books that raises big questions for the larger field of global labor history, no less than feminist history. It insists that we cannot silo the quest for economic justice from the fight for democracy, an insight for our time as much as a key to recovering a prior generation of activists. It is good to think with and through. Hence, we gathered a group of feminist historians who focus on different regions and topics to do just that for this review dossier. We wanted to expand on and decenter the transnational and global influence of Cobble’s feminists and their views on capitalism and democracy. Did these ideas function as an example for feminists in other parts of the world? How did US feminists actively strive to internationalize and advocate their ideas? To what extent did they learn from activist women elsewhere? What competing ideas and policies were available internationally, including, but not limited to, socialist and communist initiatives and decolonial nationalisms?

We asked dossier interlocutors to consider the following questions in crafting their pieces: What is at stake in the terms used by historians to capture the politics and visions of protagonists, such as progressives, labor feminists, legal equality feminists, liberals, social democrats, left feminists, or Cobble’s new label, “full rights feminists”? How does the study of full-rights feminists illuminate questions of economic and political democracy? How does excavating a social democratic tradition in the United States shift understandings of US politics and social democracy, uprooting histories of the left and of feminism, as well as labor and socialist internationalism? Beyond recovery, what do we gain from attention to the ideas and activism of low-income and immigrant women in our various histories? How do questions of race/white privilege, citizenship, empire, colonialism, and imperialism complicate understandings of equality and democracy?

Additionally, what is revealed by the book’s focus on class in women’s history and the divisions among women over the nature of capitalism and democracy? In Cobble’s story, debates among progressive women were as fraught as those between conservative and progressive forces. Women’s movements divided as readily over means as the ends of policies and programs. How social movements resolve the perennial and vexing questions of separatism versus integration; movement politics versus party politics; revolution versus reform; grassroots versus top-down; authoritarianism versus representative democracy; political violence as a tactic – these concerns seem newly relevant to women’s history as well as to political and global history. How have female-led movements differed from male-led ones historically, and what does that suggest about a world in which politics and social movements are feminizing? What does it mean in terms of our historical analysis as well as current predicament to rethink the struggle for human rights, as Cobble argues, as one that encompassed social and economic rights – a division that official US policy strove to maintain in its ideological battles against state socialism?

While calling *For the Many* “magnificent”, “magisterial”, and “sweeping”, roundtable writers suggest other avenues of inquiry. Jocelyn Olcott, a Latin Americanist and feminist theorist of care, highlights the transnational conversation on the labors of social reproduction; she would build upon Cobble’s foundation through considering

national efforts elsewhere, like Cuba, and preserving the work of current grassroots activists. Taking off from Cobble's concept, South Asianist Samita Sen reconsiders feminism in India, emphasizing a broader internationalism and the presence of socialist and communist women. Europeanist Celia Donert asks about debates within Europe among socialist, Catholic unionist, and social democratic women and within regional forums in the East as well as the West. African Americanist Yvette Richards underscores the efforts of Black women against the imperialism, ethnocentrism, and racism that others in Cobble's laborite circle could fail to recognize or overcome. Magaly Rodríguez García, a historian of the League of Nations and also of commercialized sex, asks for an even wider net of inclusion, one that would embrace trans sex workers and radical whores, whose subaltern voices were rarely heard by full-rights feminists. In response, Dorothy Sue Cobble emphasizes that "the world made American feminism" and reiterates that the sex discrimination concerns of the privileged narrows the feminist promise of social justice for the many. She has the last word in this dossier, but not in the writing of transnational and global history. As a model feminist study, *For the Many* encourages excavating the past to forge a new democratic future.