

COMMENT

Transatlantic Socialist Feminisms in the Cold War World

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Abstract

This review essay engages with Dorothy Sue Cobble's *For The Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality* from the perspective of European histories of socialist feminism during the Cold War. The essay suggests three themes that might lead to further discussion. These concern first of all the role of left-Catholic as well as Social Democratic women within the networks that Cobble describes in *For the Many*; second, the influence of nationalist or other exclusionary discourses on debates about the rights of immigrant workers, and third, the role of social democratic actors in shaping debates about working women's rights in other international organizations - particularly regional organizations such as the EEC/EU. The essay concludes that *For the Many* is a major contribution to our understanding of transatlantic socialist feminisms in the Cold War world.

In 1946, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO) took the unlikely step of appointing a woman – German–Jewish émigré and former socialist member of the German Reichstag Toni Sender – as its full-time paid representative to the newly created United Nations. Born into a middle-class Orthodox Jewish family, in Frankfurt, in 1888, Sender was deeply involved in European socialist and labour politics from an early age. Unlike Clara Zetkin, however, with whom she worked in the Socialist Women's International Secretariat, Sender did not join the Communist Party of Germany. Instead, she represented the Social Democratic Party in the Reichstag from 1922 until 1933, when Hitler's rise to power forced her to escape to Czechoslovakia, before making her way to the United States. There, she drew on her experience of European socialisms as a champion of economic and social rights at the UN.

Sender's story is just one example of the numerous ways in which *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality* (hereafter *For the Many*) foregrounds the internationalism of socialist feminism in the US. More importantly, it reinserts social democratic and labour movement women into

international histories of feminism during the twentieth century, paying particular attention to global campaigns for equal pay, the rights of working parents (especially mothers), and domestic or care work, which, for too long, have been analysed from the perspective of Cold War struggles between communism and liberal ideals.

By tracing the individual trajectories of American “full-rights” feminists in a period that was “coterminous with the heyday of American social democracy from the 1930s to the 1970s” Dorothy Sue Cobble’s magnificent new book brilliantly deconstructs many of the Cold War paradigms that shape historical scholarship on feminism in the twentieth-century world.

While Cobble’s 2004 book *The Other Women’s Movement* focused on United States “labour feminists”, who saw the labour movement as a vehicle for eliminating sex-based disadvantages for working-class women, *For the Many* focuses, to a greater extent, on the internationalism of women labour leaders. The Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) appears in the first part of the book as the paradigm of “women’s social democratic internationalism in twentieth-century America” on the basis of its leaders’ dedication to “democracy and social equality” and their opposition to “Social Darwinist disdain for working people [...] laissez-faire economic ideologies and America First isolationism” (p. 15). Cobble’s earlier work demonstrated that the domestic influence of the WTUL had been underappreciated. *For the Many* focuses on US social democratic feminists’ engagement with international organizations, such as the ILO and the United Nations’ Commission on the Status of Women. This perspective develops Cobble’s earlier arguments about the influence of New Deal social justice feminism on US labour feminism since the 1950s, placing these debates in an international perspective, and emphasising that “to study American politics one must see its borders as porous and its history affected by global ideas, peoples, and events”.

Historians of feminist movements outside the United States will thus find a great deal of interest in *For the Many*, not least due to its productive engagement with new histories of internationalism and global labour movements. A rich body of scholarship has recently emerged on internationalism and international organizations in the twentieth century, which aims to dethrone European and US policymakers and expertise and demonstrate how other actors, especially from the Global South, shaped international law and governance in an age of total war and decolonization.¹ At the same time, historians of work and workers, such as Marcel van der Linden, have argued for a more inclusive global labour history that takes account of the former socialist states and the Global South, as well as the paternalism of traditional labour movements.² In 1919, the International Labour Organization – a central focus of Cobble’s story – conceptualized Western male industrial workers as the norm, against which “universal” labour standards should be measured, while women and colonial labourers required either special protections (addressing maternity, dangerous work, or family responsibilities) or special rules for “backward” regions that also

¹Patricia Clavin and Glenda Sluga (eds), *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge, 2017).

²Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden, 2008).

maintained colonialism.³ Over the course of the twentieth century, however, ILO delegates from the Global South used the organization to challenge the civilizing discourse of its Western founders, while scholars, politicians, and activists also approached the ILO as a site for contesting women's rights.⁴ Drawing on Elizabeth Borgwardt's formulation, Cobble suggests that American social-democratic feminists contributed to these struggles by proposing a "New Deal for the world".

However, *For the Many* is far from a diffusionist story of an "American model for the world" (p. 353). Some of its most interesting insights stem from the way in which Cobble draws on recent scholarship on international communist and anti-imperialist organizations to reinterpret – and provincialize – American feminist internationalism. International organizations such as the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) or the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) were founded as relatively diverse leftist umbrella organizations at the end of World War II but moved closer to the Soviet camp as Cold War tensions sharpened in the late 1940s. The historian Francisca de Haan has argued that the WIDF was erased from the historiography of international women's movements by Cold War paradigms, which assumed women in communist organizations supported by the Soviet Bloc could not have exercised agency.⁵ Such assumptions, De Haan argues, were rooted in the assumption that mass organizations in socialist countries were simply "transmission belts" that implemented the will of the Party and offered no space for individual or collective negotiation by societal actors. These assumptions have been overturned in recent years by a wave of historiography on "state feminism" in socialist Bulgaria or the People's Republic of China, which demonstrates that female activists in the official women's organizations in these countries did use their access to political decision-making to defend women's interests within the structures of the socialist state.⁶

For the Many does not simply tack these observations onto a history of US feminism, but rather uses De Haan's insights to reinterpret the actions of women working within the US administration. A central figure in *For the Many* is Esther Peterson, director of the Women's Bureau in the US Department of Labor from 1961 and inspiration behind Kennedy's Presidential Commission on Women. Peterson was deeply influenced by her close contacts with Swedish social democracy and the

³Eileen Boris, "Woman's Labours and the Definition of the Worker: Legacies of 1919", in Stefano Bellucci and Holger Weiss (eds), *Internationalisation of the Labour Question: Ideological Antagonism, Workers' Movements and the ILO since 1919* (London, 2020), pp. 71–93; Susan Zimmermann, "Special Circumstances" in Geneva: The ILO and the World of Non-Metropolitan Labour in the Interwar Years", in Jasmin van Daele et al. (eds), *ILO Histories: Essays on the International Labour Organization and Its Impact on the World during the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2010), pp. 221–250.

⁴Eileen Boris, Dorothea Hoehtker, and Susan Zimmermann (eds), *Women's ILO: Transnational Networks, Global Labour Standards and Gender Equity, 1919 to Present* (Leiden and Geneva, 2018).

⁵Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)", *Women's History Review*, 19:4 (2010), pp. 547–573.

⁶Kristen Ghodsee, "Pressuring the Politburo: The Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement and State Socialist Feminism", *Slavic Review*, 73:3 (2014), pp. 538–562; Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1964* (Berkeley, CA, 2017).

Brussels-based International Council of Free Trade Unions, while decisively rejecting communism as undemocratic. Cobble argues that women such as Peterson should be understood not as anti-communist “Cold Warriors” but as “social democratic New Dealers”, who rejected Cold War orthodoxies and “pressed for expanded social welfare and worker power” (p. 300). In other words, Cobble notes in a pointed aside, the political agency de Haan grants to “Soviet women applies equally to women in the United States and elsewhere” (p. 520).

By casting American social democratic women as “full-rights feminists”, who believed civil and political rights were entwined with social and economic rights – thus differentiating themselves from the “equal-rights feminists” associated with the National Woman’s Party and campaigns for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) – Cobble reminds us that this was a struggle within or between different feminist movements. In other words, social democratic women did not simply privilege class interests over gender. At the same time, *For the Many* emphasizes international solidarity between the American women at the heart of her story and Social Democratic and labour movement women in Scandinavia and Central Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In the early Cold War, Cobble writes, “opposition to Communist regimes unified social democratic Western women in the 1950s, just as antifascism had bound together women from Allied nations earlier”. At the same time, she acknowledges that “Cold War rivalries also clearly constrained women’s cooperation across the blocs and limited their internationalist visions”. As the presence of New Deal women waned at the ILO by the early 1950s, they were replaced by a younger cohort of activists working through international labour networks associated with the ICFTU. By the late 1960s, however, a younger generation of New Left feminists had emerged, who were inspired by the “anti-imperialist internationalism of their left-wing and communist foremothers [...] more than the social democratic internationalism of New Dealers” (p. 382).

This history of connections between North American and European socialist feminists during the Cold War suggests that the entanglement of progressive social politics across the Atlantic did not simply end with the United States’ turn away from universal public programmes of social provision after World War II.⁷ Britain and Sweden “held particular allure” (p. 192) for feminist New Dealers such as Frances Perkins, and connections to European social democrats were maintained in the post-war years by figures such as Esther Peterson. African American trade unionist Maida Springer, on the other hand, immersed herself in London’s Black community of émigré pan-Africanist intellectuals and activists (p. 243), such as the “socialist anti-communist” George Padmore, later describing these as life-altering moments (p. 245). Throughout her narrative, Cobble pays close attention to the ways in which racial politics determined access to social provision in both Europe and the United States. She reminds us that Toni Sender, the German–Jewish non-communist socialist, was rebuked by the AFL when she tried to include a clause on “workers’ right to move” within and across national borders into an International Bill of Trade Union Rights at the UN, just a couple of years after the end of World War

⁷Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

II. National – and nationalist – priorities might have constrained the internationalist visions of Cobble’s protagonists, but they did not stop them.

International organizations, a crucial space for feminists denied access to national politics since the late nineteenth century, provided a vital space for feminist internationalism – whether liberal democratic, social democratic or communist – during the Cold War. Central to this post-war international order was an emphasis on individual human rights, and *For the Many* reminds us of the importance of bringing feminist perspectives to bear on the history of human rights in the second half of the twentieth century. This was as much – indeed, often – a story of false starts and failure as it was of success, but Cobble concludes her story on a cautiously optimistic note. The final chapter turns to the end of the Cold War, noting the AFL-CIO’s support for the independent Polish trade union Solidarność in the 1980s, the US Democratic Party returning to power in 1993 – “remade in the neoliberal image” (p. 399) – and US participation – headed by First Lady Hillary Clinton – at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. But in a climate of free-market libertarianism and small government, Cobble asks, “were feminists remaking an organization that no longer mattered?” (p. 405). Yet, in a late-twentieth century world of plummeting living standards and rapidly increasing inequality, Cobble argues, “the global working women’s movement that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s helped renew an aging trade unionism. It also energized full-rights feminism worldwide” (p. 409). The new feminist internationalists of the twenty-first century are waging their struggles for democracy and equality both in international arenas, like the UN and ILO, and through grassroots political activism driven by a “feminism for the 99%”.

Reading *For the Many* as a historian of Europe rather than the US, my questions circled around three main themes. First, some of the European socialist women who appear in the book – such as Maria Weber of the West German trade union federation (DGB) – were representatives of Christian Democratic or left-Catholic tendencies within the labour movement. I wondered to what extent Cobble’s emphasis on transatlantic social democratic alliances inadvertently marginalized this important aspect of socialist debates about women’s work during the early Cold War, particularly regarding protection of the family. Second, I wondered if the social democratic women at the heart of *For the Many* were always as supportive of open borders and the rights of all workers, regardless of race or origin, as Cobble suggests. To what extent did questions of national belonging, social hygiene, and even eugenics influence Swedish or German debates about social and economic rights of immigrant or “non-citizen” workers, and how were such questions reflected in the US context? Third, I was curious how Cobble sees the international social democratic actors and networks at the heart of *For the Many* influencing debates about working women’s rights in other international – and especially regional – forums, such as the European Union.

In conclusion, *For the Many* is a book that should be read and discussed by scholars well beyond the field of US feminism or labour history. For historians of contemporary Europe, Cobble’s book is an essential contribution to lively ongoing debates about the history of women’s work and struggles for working women’s rights in both the democratic welfare states of Western Europe and the socialist welfare

dictatorships in Eastern Europe.⁸ In common with other recent studies of global feminism, Cobble hopes that her history of twentieth-century socialist feminist struggles will help to inform the campaigns of the twenty-first.⁹ *For the Many* argues that full-rights feminism aimed to raise the standard of life for everyone by embracing “politics” as a means of reconciling difference rather than seeking to erase it. As Toni Sender wrote in her memoir, *The Autobiography of a German Rebel*, after emigrating to the US in 1939: “Political democracy is in actual danger unless accompanied by the establishment of social justice.”

⁸See the Forum on “Women, Work and Value in Post-War Europe”, Josie McLellan *et al.* (eds), *Contemporary European History*, 28:4 (2019); ZARAH project on women’s labour activism in Eastern Europe led by Susan Zimmermann, <https://zarah-ceu.org/>.

⁹For example, Kristen Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism, and Other Arguments for Economic Independence* (Harmondsworth, 2018); Lucy Delap, *Feminisms: A Global History* (Harmondsworth, 2020).