

COMMENT

“A Feminism For the Many”: Response to the Comments

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Abstract

For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality recasts American feminism as a global story and reclaims the fight for economic justice and social democracy as a majority tradition of women’s politics. This rejoinder by the author of *For the Many* is the concluding essay in a review dossier on the book. Cobble discusses the book’s origins and its contributions to global history, women’s history, and political history. She engages with comments and queries from dossier reviewers, a diverse group of historians of Latin America, South Asia, Africa, and Europe. Topics include, among others, the unfinished struggle to revalue care and social reproduction, the influence of India on US feminism, Black internationalism and full-rights feminism, varieties of socialism, rethinking Cold War frameworks, and feminist perspectives on eugenics, race, and sexuality.

I am grateful to Eileen Boris and the *International Review of Social History* editors for initiating a review dossier on *For the Many* and for inviting such a stellar, thoughtful, and diverse group of commentators. I appreciate the time and care each contributor took in crafting her essay and I am thrilled to be part of this exchange.

In *For the Many*, I sought to recover the long and wide stream of US women’s social-democratic politics over the last century – a tradition I call “full rights feminism”. This tradition, I argue, was more robust and influential than we have imagined, with full-rights feminists in the forefront of the fight to shift US political culture to the left, bolster democratic movements and institutions, and enact progressive social policy.

Full-rights feminists believed women faced disadvantages as a sex and they organized with other men and women to end those disadvantages. Yet, women’s rights, they insisted, could not be separated from the other great social issues of the day. They wanted the *full* array of rights – economic, social, political, and civil – and they saw these rights as intertwined and inseparable. In their view, multiple forms of domination must be confronted if the majority of women (and men) were to flourish.

Their multi-stranded intersectional feminist politics put them at odds with “equal rights” feminists like those in the US-based National Woman’s Party, who held single-mindedly to a narrow feminism centered on achieving legal equality between men and women. They clashed too with conservatives and “free market” liberals of every sort – men and women, feminists and non-feminists – over the desirability of social welfare and labor legislation, the need to constrain corporate power and foster workplace democracy, and the rights of workers, immigrants, and people of color. They rejected go-it-alone nationalism as well as interventionist policies seeking American economic and military dominance. Instead, they pressed for a global order premised on shared economic prosperity and equity among nations and peoples.

Full-rights feminists parted ways with those on the left who espoused revolutionary violence, or who, after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, conflated socialism with Soviet-style communism. They eschewed authoritarianism from the right or left. Armed struggle and one-party rule, they judged, were weapons of the arrogant and the unimaginative. Better to pursue change through other means: the ballot box, popular education, democratic participation, and non-violent direct action tactics such as strikes, boycotts, and mass protest.

For the Many grew out of my long-standing desire to globalize the story of US feminism and understand it as a movement shaped by global events, ideas, and peoples. Despite the flourishing of global and transnational history since the 1990s, synthetic accounts of twentieth-century American feminism remain nation-centered and concentrate on domestic developments. In contrast, *For the Many* emphasizes US women’s transnational engagements and sees global forces and phenomena as crucial makers of American women’s history and politics.

Feminism did not start in America and go elsewhere. It started everywhere and came to America. The world made American feminism. It sprang from the foreign-born and the native-born, from citizen and non-citizen, from sojourners who stayed for days or years, and from those who never set foot inside US borders. Australia’s Alice Henry, Sweden’s Sigrid Ekendahl, and India’s Ela Bhatt left their mark on US feminism, as did Polish immigrant Rose Schneiderman, German refugee Toni Sender, and Black Panama-born internationalist Maida Springer.

In *For the Many*, as elsewhere in my writing,¹ I reject Whiggish presumptions that each generation is more enlightened than the next or that the power of women expands in tandem with their entry into paid market work. I depict feminism as continuous, contentious, and multi-directional, with advances for some often accompanied by setbacks for others. In my telling, the “second wave” of the late 1960s and 1970s is not the high point of feminist consciousness or of women’s activism. Earlier struggles – such as those for worker rights, social democracy, and an end to the global color line – loom just as large.

I believe it a good thing to expand the boundaries of feminist history and rethink limiting and hierarchical notions of who qualifies as a “feminist”. Restricting

¹For example: Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ, 2004); *idem*, “The Long History of Women’s Freedom Struggles”, *Feminist Formations*, 22:1 (2010), pp. 86–90; and *idem*, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women’s Movements* (New York, 2014).

feminism to single-sex women's movements or reserving the term "feminist" for those who prioritized the struggle for sex equality, as some scholars still do, excludes the majority of those who fought for women's emancipation.² Some highly privileged women may experience sex discrimination as the primary or sole exploitation. But this tiny group should not define what emancipation means for all women or what feminist priorities should be. Nor should their problems and reform efforts be taken as the central threads of feminist history.

In her introduction, Eileen Boris ably traces the larger arc of *For the Many*. The book opens with the explosion of democracy movements worldwide before World War I and the dramatic story of how labor and socialist women from Asia, Europe, and the Americas launched the first international federation of women workers and shaped the ILO's first set of international labor standards in 1919. I then follow the thread of US women's full-rights politics over the next hundred years, as it winds East and West, South and North. US women partnered with and drew inspiration from labor and social democratic struggles around the world. They learned as well from anti-colonial movements, especially in South Asia and Africa.

Jocelyn Olcott's commentary eloquently conveys the core beliefs of full-rights feminists and their "long struggle to imbricate civil and political rights with social and economic rights". She foregrounds two "particularly valuable" contributions of *For the Many*: its attention to the efforts of full-rights feminists to secure just wages and respect for the "paid and unpaid labors of social reproduction", and its illumination of "the deeply transnational nature of these conversations". I am grateful to her for highlighting these principal themes in *For the Many* and for her detailed and generous review of the book.

Olcott asks a question much in need of further research and consideration: why, despite women's considerable activism, does US "policymaking continue to ignore the time, effort, and expertise of social reproduction"? Part of the answer, as many feminist scholars pinpoint, lies in the dependence of capitalism and patriarchy on the devaluation and invisibility of household and caring labor. But the US has its own distinctive mix of reasons, some of which I discuss in *For the Many*. The US capital class, the most powerful in the world, forged what Black trade union leader A. Philip Randolph called an "unholy alliance" with the forces of white supremacy and thwarted expansion of state provisions. Such reactionary forces deemed state aid to poor and non-white mothers as especially objectionable since the value of these women, in their assessment, derived from their exploited market labor not their sustenance of family or community.

Yet, as I argue in *For the Many*, by the end of the 1930s the US was neither a leader nor a laggard in social welfare provision when compared to other nations. Its outlier status is actually fairly recent. After the 1930s, as much of the world moved in one

²Eileen Boris alludes to this persistent scholarly tendency in the first paragraph of her introduction to the review dossier. Nancy Cott, for example, urged in 1989 that the term "feminist" should be reserved for "movements of women" that make "gender hierarchy central". Striking working-class housewives, Black women struggling against slavery, and women in nationalist revolutions lacked "feminist consciousness", she determined, and were best described using other vocabulary. See 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 (1989), pp. 826–828.

direction – expanding healthcare, basic income, paid leaves, and other social guarantees – the US moved in the other. Bombs and profit took precedence over human flourishing. Understanding how the United States lost its way is a crucial question for feminists to answer; so, too, is understanding how and why movements for the rights of caregivers made progress in Latin America and elsewhere.

Olcott wants researchers to dig deep and excavate the histories of lesser-known women. I share her concern. When I began my research over a decade ago, very few of my principal figures had Wikipedia entries. That is no longer true, and it is a welcome development. But the explosion of digital information about female historical figures can, paradoxically, end up encouraging just what Olcott fears: a homogenizing of feminist global history and a recycling of the same cast of characters. Indeed, as documents from a few well-funded archives in wealthy countries dominate the web, Olcott's call to create new sources through oral history, interviews, and old-fashioned sleuthing in off-grid files remains essential. Global history as a field will need to evolve as the world becomes more treacherous to navigate and travel less an option. Perhaps the wisdom of “the global is local” is more relevant than ever.

Samita Sen's learned, informative commentary directs readers to recent work in South Asian gender history and to the rich varieties of South Asian women's full-rights feminism. I found her discussion fascinating and agree that we have “barely scratched the surface” in our work of recovery. I was also intrigued to discover parallel turns in South Asian and US feminist historiography: the “rich continuity of activism”; the rejection of the 1950s and 1960s as “dead decades”; the “braiding of the local, the national, and the global”; and a desire to capture “ideological heterodoxies”.

As my research on *For the Many* progressed, US–India exchange emerged as a prominent theme. Indian thought and action exerted a remarkable pull on US feminists, with transnational female friendships a major conduit for exchange. Such relationships ranged from the intense affinities between Irish–American labor leader Leonora O'Reilly and Indian educator Parvatibai Athavale in the World War I era to the consequential midcentury collaborations of Black New Deal official Mary McLeod Bethune and Indian independence leader Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to the enduring connections a youthful Gloria Steinem formed with Indian intellectuals and activists. In her twenties, Steinem spent two life-changing years in 1950s India. What she learned there became core to her political philosophy as she and others recast US feminism in the 1970s.

Celia Donert finds *For the Many* “brilliantly deconstructs many of the Cold War paradigms that continue to shape historical scholarship” and “reinserts social democratic and labour movement women into international histories of feminism”. The book furthers efforts to “reinterpret – and provincialize – American feminist internationalism”, she observes, and is “far from a diffusionist story of an ‘American model for the world’”. I value her positive assessment of *For the Many* and her review's precise rendering of core dimensions of the study.

As Donert urges, scholars need to move beyond a bi-polar Cold War framework that analyzes the world “from the perspective of Cold War struggles between communism and liberal ideals”. Varieties of socialism flourished in all regions of the world; so did forms of authoritarianism. Socialist allies became socialist foes, too, as the world spun in unpredictable ways. Toni Sender's life offers a particularly

illuminating version of these twists and turns, as Donert notes. Sender's voluminous archive, hidden away at the Wisconsin Historical Society, awaits biographers, as does the trove of documents at Vassar College devoted to Christian socialist Margaret Bondfield, the first female British cabinet member.

I agree with Donert that women like the DGB's Maria Weber, who represented "Christian Democratic or left-Catholic tendencies within the labor movement", deserve more attention. Our histories of labor, feminism, and socialism remain unduly secular, especially given the prominence of religious belief in spurring activism and framing labor and social policy. Margaret Bondfield, Frances Perkins, Dorothy Height, Mary Van Kleeck, Charlotte Bunch, and many other full-rights feminists, I soon came to understand as I read their memoirs, letters, and speeches, could not be understood apart from their religious faith. Some considered themselves Christian socialists; others drew on Social Gospel Christianity or on the progressive teachings of Judaism, Catholicism, and other faiths. A surprising number found their way to social justice struggles via programs offered by the Young Women's Christian Association.

Did full-rights feminists support open borders and the rights of all workers, regardless of race or origin? Given the dominant racist, elitist, and nationalist ideologies of the time, debates over these issues among full-rights feminists could be heated. Significantly, however, organizations like the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) bucked American Federation of Labor orthodoxy and called for freer movement of peoples across borders, non-discriminatory government policies for migrant entry and citizenship (including migrants from Asia), and a more inclusive labor movement welcoming of all races, religions, and nationalities. The WTUL had an unusually large number of immigrant women leaders, who spoke unapologetically about the necessity of such changes. Their voices made a difference in swaying others, as did the racial justice advocacy of full-rights feminists of color.

Donert asks about the influence of "international social democratic actors and networks" on regional forums. In *For the Many*, I investigate this issue most fully in the context of Pan-American and Pan-Pacific regional organizations. European regionalism, however, is certainly a worthy subject for further investigation. Did the women's committees and caucuses in the ICFTU, the WFTU, or the ILO, for example, spur Pan-European sentiment and cross-border understanding? That appears to have been the case – although in a limited Cold War fashion – for the first ICFTU residential summer school for women. The 1953 school attracted students from twenty-four different countries, with over half from Western Europe. Some of the most intense memories of participants had to do with resolving conflicts *among* Western European delegates, with Dutch women threatening to leave over what they considered the overbearing behavior of the Germans.

In her essay, Yvette Richards masterfully traces the currents of Black full-rights feminist activism in *For the Many* while adding marvelous new details from her own extensive research. She is attentive to my efforts to capture "multiple and overlapping networks of activists" and show how Black and white women "worked and struggled together". In writing *For the Many*, it was not always clear how best to narrate the oft-separate histories of white-led and Black-led women's movements in the United States or how to convey the depth of white racism alongside the many "solid

friendships” and alliances that formed across racial lines. I appreciate her expert navigation of that history in her commentary.

Richards alerts us to Black women like Anna Arnold Hedgeman and Ora Lee Malone, who do not appear in *For the Many* but whose lives “expand and solidify” an argument for “full rights feminist praxis”. Richards notes, as well, some of the Black activists whose stories I recount – from “lesser-known” labor activists like Irene Goins and Dollie Lowther Robinson to prominent figures like Dorothy Height, Mary McLeod Bethune, Pauli Murray, and Maida Springer.

Springer’s life reveals aspects of feminist history that often get sidelined, and I am deeply indebted to Richards’ pioneering books on Springer. It was exhilarating to track Springer’s tenacious movement-building over so many decades – from her first successes organizing multiracial garment shops in the 1930s, to her decades in Africa, to her final years spurring women’s leadership in rural Mississippi, South Africa, Indonesia, and Turkey. In 2002, aged ninety-two, Springer traveled to Africa for the last time to raise funds for Kenya’s agricultural union, the nation’s largest, and to support its fight for a child’s right to education.

Magaly Rodríguez García is right: *For the Many* is not a history of sex work. Nor is it an exploration of the debates among feminists over prostitution. My contribution to the flourishing literature on sex work and sexuality at work is best accessed in earlier books and articles.³ García’s essay, however, offers an excellent entrée into these important topics, drawing on her many insightful, in-depth studies over the last decade.

García is also right that US social reformers were far from perfect and that some held beliefs we would judge pernicious today. As mentioned earlier, while some resisted prevailing racist and elitist ideologies, others did not. In particular, García faults early twentieth-century social reformers like Jane Addams, Grace Abbott, and Sophonisba Breckinridge for their use of eugenic theories and their moral condemnation of the commercial sex industry. The pseudo-science of eugenics was, indeed, widespread in the United States and in much of the world until World War II, and leading US women social scientists and reformers – as well as Black intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois, Fabian Socialists like Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Swedish social democrats like Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, and Soviet ethnographers and nation builders – used its language.⁴ In addition, most American female social reformers a century ago judged sex workers as more exploited than empowered and believed the sex industry morally debased all those involved, whether men, women, or children.

The devil is in the details, however. These same turn-of-the-century women social reformers also refused many aspects of eugenic thought. They vehemently rejected scientific racism, helped found the National Association for the Advancement of

³For example, Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL, 1991), esp. pp. 125–131; *idem*, “More Intimate Unions”, in Eileen Boris and Rhacel Parreñas (eds), *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, (Stanford, CA, 2010), pp. 280–295.

⁴See, among others, Diane Paul, “Eugenics and the Left”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 45 (Oct–Dec 1984), pp. 567–590; Mark B. Adams (ed.), *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia* (New York and Oxford, 1990); Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics and American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton, NJ, 2017).

Colored People in 1909, led opposition to the 1920s immigration laws premised on eugenic theories of Caucasian superiority, and insisted that environmental factors (not heredity) explained behavior.⁵ In addition, they pushed for an end to sexual double standards and sought more rights and state benefits for poor and migrant women, including women in the sex industry. Breckinridge spearheaded a two-year campaign in the late 1920s to protect the civil rights of accused prostitutes in Chicago courtrooms. Grace Abbott, whose widely read 1917 book *The Immigrant and the Community* challenged the “racial” inferiority of migrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, used her leadership of the Chicago Immigrants’ Protective League and the US Children’s Bureau to champion social wages for mothers and children of all races and nationalities, delivered without stigma and condescension (pp. 69, 104, 168–169).⁶

For many full-rights feminists throughout the twentieth century, no woman had real freedom or real choice until the larger structures of power and inequality were upended. That analysis applied to women in the sex trades as well as to the millions of other women who had to use their sexuality to keep a job, increase their chances of a higher tip or a living wage, or secure a just portion of the family wage.

García suggests that full-rights feminists ignored the voices of the marginalized. Yet, the activists I follow pressed repeatedly at home and abroad for extending fair labor standards to those historically excluded and paid close attention to the needs of household workers, paid and unpaid. They sought to broaden the definition of “worker” to encompass the unwaged, the marginalized, and the invisible. Instances of their actions along these lines abound in the book. At the same time, they did not conceptualize those in the commercial sex trade as sex workers – a perspective that, as García explains, did not emerge until the 1970s.

Full-rights feminism was not a club closed to the marginalized. Rather, it was (and is) a feminist *tradition* that the marginalized – including those marginalized because of sexual behavior – adopted and helped to shape. *For the Many* closes with a discussion of the Argentinean sex workers union, *Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices de la Argentina*, to illustrate the rise of full-rights female-led movements among precarious and stigmatized groups since the 1970s (pp. 409–414). It is important to note too that, before the 1970s, a large number of the women I profile – Frieda Miller, Pauline Newman, Mary Dreier, Frances Kellor, Rose Schneiderman, Maud O’Farrell Swartz, Pauli Murray, and others – rejected reigning sexual orthodoxies and chose intimate relationships with other women. Recognized as a transgender pioneer today, Murray cross-dressed as a teenage boy in her youth in the 1930s

⁵In the 1930s, as detailed in *For the Many*, full-rights feminists continued the early twentieth-century challenge to eugenic thought. Among America’s fiercest opponents to fascism, they led campaigns in the unions and government to discredit its virulent anti-Semitism and racism. On the environment versus heredity debate, see Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Endless Crusade: Women Social Scientists and Progressive Reform* (New York and Oxford, 1990), pp. 60–66.

⁶Anya Jabour, *Sophonisba Breckinridge: Championing Women’s Activism in Modern America* (Urbana, IL, 2019), p. 163. On Abbott, see also *The Grace Abbott Reader*, edited by John Sorensen with Judith Sealander (Lincoln, NE, 2008); and Felice Batlan, “Déjà vu and the Gendered Origins of the Practice of Immigrant Law: The Immigrants’ Protective League”, *Law and History Review*, 36 (2018), pp. 713–769.

and struggled throughout her life to understand her sexual desires for other women and her sense of herself as a man.

For the Many is not meant to be a comprehensive account of twentieth-century US feminism or of women's transnational activism. I am not even sure either is possible. What I hope is that it illuminates some forgotten corners of our past, challenges some outmoded and limited ways of thinking, inspires more attention to labor and social democratic traditions in the US and around the world, and opens up possibilities for other scholars.