A Feminism That Means Something

BY
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Liberal feminism’s laser-like focus on winning formal equality between the sexes has distracted us from what should be feminism's true aim: winning a world where everyone has their basic needs met and everyone can flourish.

Review of Dorothy Sue Cobble *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality* (Princeton University Press, 2021)

It’s a dramatic moment, one that would make a great scene in a Hollywood film if Hollywood made movies about Jewish socialist feminists. In 1911, Rose Schneiderman rose in anger at a memorial to the 146 young garment workers who had just died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City. Schneiderman had immigrated to New York at eight, lived in an orphanage, and worked sewing linings into men’s caps, organizing the first female local of the socialist United Cloth Hat and Cap Maker’s Union.

Addressing the mostly well-off women of the New York Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL), she proclaimed, “I can’t talk fellowship to you who are gathered here. Too much blood has been spilled. I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. The only way they can save themselves is by a strong working-class movement.”

And yet, as Dorothy Sue Cobble demonstrates in her comprehensive new history *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality,* Schneiderman had a more complex relationship to class politics than her impassioned words would suggest. A few years earlier, the leaders of the WTUL gave Schneiderman a stipend so she could quit factory work and go to school. Despite her anger at League members, she continued to organize with them and served as president of the New York branch for twenty years.

Schneiderman fought for suffrage but saw it as inadequate for meeting the needs of working women. She clashed with well-off feminists and male unionists alike. She ran for office under the Socialist Party banner, but later befriended Eleanor Roosevelt and served in FDR's cabinet as the only woman member of the National Recovery Administration.

Though Schneiderman's life was particularly dramatic, Cobble's book is brimming with stories of women who similarly moved in and out of unions, feminist organizations, and government posts. While many accounts of conflicting feminist traditions focus on ideological or identity-based differences, Cobble's interest is in the nuts and bolts of organizing and organizations.

She mostly refrains from editorializing about contemporary parallels and lets her meticulously documented history speak for itself. But many of the tactical dilemmas that Schneiderman and other activists faced will be familiar to the Left today. Should we pressure a recalcitrant union from within, perhaps by forming a caucus? Or should we create a separate organization? What about a third party? And if you take a government post in a (somewhat) sympathetic government, what if you face disappointment? How long should you carry on?

Liberal Feminism and "Full Rights Feminism"

Cobble, who helped pioneer the history of women and labor in the US with books on waitress unions and the feminization of the working class, here identifies a tradition she terms "full rights feminism" that spans the twentieth century.

She begins with the founding of the WTUL in 1903, documenting their alliances with the National Consumer's League — founded by socialist Florence Kelley — and the settlement house movement, which sought to provide for the material needs of the growing industrial working class while also offering community spaces for political and cultural activities. From there, she details the work of organizers and activists who saw formal equality between the sexes as insufficient, viewing social and economic rights as essential to women's freedom.

This may sound like a rough definition of socialist feminism, and at times, it feels like a way to avoid parsing the distinctions between liberals, social democrats, socialists, and communists.

Nevertheless, it's striking how much of this vision Cobble's subjects shared across differences of race, ethnicity, generation, and nationality. It's also striking — and more than a little depressing — that their critiques of what is sometimes called "liberal" feminism but might be more appropriately called "less-than-full rights" feminism remain so relevant.

A century ago, following the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, Alice Paul, founder of the New Women's Party, brushed aside calls for the NWP to organize against racialized voting barriers like poll taxes, literacy tests, and citizenship exclusions. Instead, Paul's NWP forged ahead with a laser focus on winning formal legal equality through the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

During the fights over the ERA in the 1970s, the idea that formal equality might hurt women by eliminating protections was the province of the Right. But during the 1920s, the WTUL criticized the NWP's fixation on the ERA in part because it threatened protections for pregnant women, mothers, and children in the workforce.

The WTUL wanted higher wages and protections extended to all, but it saw fair labor standards for women and children as a wedge that might open the way. While the debate around protective legislation has largely been understood as pitting male-dominated unions against feminists, Cobble shows it was really a debate between competing visions of feminism — one that would play out on the international scene as well.

If there was a case to be made that focusing on formal equality served working-class women, Paul and the NWP did a poor job making it, siding with business in their anti-union "open shop" campaign. Paul's response to the demands of labor-based feminism echoes that of liberal feminists today, who bemoan why the "simple" question of equal rights is so difficult to achieve: "Most reforms," Paul asserted, "most problems are complicated. But to me there is nothing complicated about ordinary equality."

Yet the fate of the ERA, which was ultimately defeated in 1982, suggests that Paul's "ordinary" equality was quite complicated. As with liberalism more broadly, the problem is not only the insufficiency of its goals, but its inability to realize them without a broader vision.

The parallels to today are obvious: the undue focus on formal equality now means fighting for equal stature in workplaces that are inhumane for everyone. And yet, the NWP's vision has shaped our understanding of feminism's trajectory in the US: a nearly century-long struggle for suffrage, followed by a dark period that lasted until the explosion of feminist consciousness in the sixties and seventies.

Cobble sees the ebbs and flows differently. She argues that the New Deal era was a high-water mark for the influence of full-rights feminists. The most expansive policies and visions of that time, both realized and unrealized, came from feminists who sought greater labor protections and a social welfare system outside of wage labor.

From the New Deal to the Second Wave

Cobble tells her story of the New Deal through the era's full-rights feminists, who often deployed a strategy of working within existing institutions while harnessing agitation from outside.

Schneiderman, formerly loyal to the Socialist Party, grew closer to the Democratic Party and became a friend and advisor to Eleanor Roosevelt. In office, she bucked the xenophobia of many labor leaders, using her National Recovery Administration position to argue for equal wage standards for Puerto Rico. Mary McLeon Bethune, who as a leader of the National Association of Colored Women advocated for domestic workers, led the informal "Black Cabinet" of federal officials pushing for anti-discrimination and anti-lynching laws; she later became an advocate for anti-colonialism within the United Nations.

In Cobble's telling, the labor secretary herself was a "full-rights feminist." Frances Perkins filled the department with women dedicated to social welfare, pushed for Social Security and a "cradle to the grave system of social insurance against unemployment, poverty, and ill health," and fought against the deportation of longshoreman leader and radical Harry Bridges when the AFL refused to do (Perkins came to her politics as a college student, studying with none other than Florence Kelley.)

The radical tide shaped the lives of a new generation of feminists from a range of backgrounds. Esther Peterson broke with her Mormon family to organize with teachers and garment workers. Maida Springer, whose family migrated from Panama to New York, became a leader in her dressmaker's union. Springer and her comrades found community at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for working-class women, "the Farm" retreats of New Dealers, and camps like Tera, a New Deal "she-she-she camp" where gender and racial justice pioneer Pauli Murray lived and worked.

Feminists in this period were at the forefront of the interracial union organizing and anti-fascism of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the ILGWU. New Deal feminists took a leading

international role, advocating for protections in the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Philadelphia Declaration that served as a model for the UN Declaration of Human Rights. But more than the conferences and resolutions, it was the comradeship and expanded horizons that made internationalism important.

Springer's transformative experience was encountering black politics in London in the 1940s, where she met the Pan-Africanist George Padmore (who had broken with Moscow over its failure to embrace anti-colonialism) and Jomo Kemyatta (an anticolonial leader who became the conservative post-colonial president of Kenya). She dedicated her later life to African independence, traveling throughout the continent as an AFL representative, fighting the union's anti-Communist foreign policy.

For Frieda Miller, who started in the WTUL and had decades of government experience by the 1940s, it was watching debates within the British Labour Party about the postwar welfare state, which inspired her to think about the necessity of restructuring household work and addressing what New Deal feminists called the "double day" of working women's lives.

By the late 1940s, these prospects had dimmed. While social welfare advanced in Europe and Latin America, in the US, the Cold War chilled the work of full-rights feminists, who tried and failed to push for a "social security for all" that would have provided full employment, universal health care, and disability insurance. Perkins and Bethune were among the early targets of postwar anticommunism. Miller and Peterson soon faced government harassment as well, and the Cold War eroded international feminist networks. The WTUL, which had been pressing for government-funded child care, labor rights, and poll tax repeal, closed its doors in 1950.

Peterson and others carried on and were instrumental in the Equal Pay Act of 1963. But by the time feminist consciousness exploded in the late 1960s and 1970s, a generational chasm had opened. Younger feminists came of age through the Civil Rights Movement and were more distant from organized labor, skeptical of its leaders' anti-communism. Another key shift, one that spanned many strains of feminism, was the belief that feminism needed to be its own movement with its own organizations.

The clearest break came in 1966, when, frustrated with the slow progress on equal pay and employment, activists created the National Organization for Women, which used an inside-outside strategy of lawsuits and pickets. Feminists led grassroots efforts to repeal abortion laws and won the extension of the Fair Labor Standards Act to domestic workers. The 1975 Mexico City conference radicalized many US participants who heard the anti-imperialist case against their government directly from other women.

Yet even as the flurry of organizing spurred previously unimaginable shifts in the public's views toward gender and sexuality, the political conditions and alliances for a fully redistributionist, pro-labor program began to fade.

Murray, who had been instrumental in founding NOW, withdrew, lamenting that NOW had become dedicated "almost solely to 'women's rights' without strong bonds with other movement towards human rights." By the 1980s relative wage "gains" for women were largely the result of falling wages for men, the wage gaps between women were widening, and the neoliberal and professionalized strains of feminism were ascendent.

A Feminism for All

Where does this leave us in 2021, when everyone knows, or claims to know, that the pandemic has revealed a "crisis of care"?

Here, Cobble's history offers powerful suggestions but leaves many questions. We learn that Esther Peterson benefited from Sweden's "mother substitute" program when she injured her knee, inspiring her to study the Swedish Home Help Program and Swedish Domestic Workers Act. We find out that when Peterson served on the Kennedy administration's Commission on the Status of Women, their report called for higher minimum wages, stronger collective bargaining laws, paid maternity leave, universal child care, Social Security benefits for homemakers, and a basic income.

Knowing this history corrects the misperception that feminists have not fought for economic rights. But it equally leaves us with a disturbing question: given that all this has been fought for, in some cases for a century-plus, why do we have almost none of those rights?

We know many of the answers: racism, anti-communism, a half-century of neoliberalism. Cobble traces all of these forces of backlash. But in focusing so much on the work of international organizations and the struggles around how resolutions were worded, debated, and passed, we sometimes lose a sense of how rights are actually won on the ground.

Schneiderman, Peterson, and Springer all moved from and between organizing workers and leading delegations, but what happens when organizing is crushed and only the delegations remain? At one point, after meticulously detailing ILO negotiations, she writes:

> Nonetheless, the ILO did not find a solution to the "problem" of family responsibilities in 1965. Nor did it do so in the 1980s when, as we shall see, the ILO replaced R123 with a new standard: Workers with Family Responsibilities, 1981 (N156). This "crisis of care" and who does the work of social reproduction has yet to be solved. It remains at the heart of the unfinished feminist project.

Does Cobble mean to suggest that this unfinished project would be completed had a better standard come out?

In contrast to the voluminous treatment of resolutions, the book devotes just one sentence to the welfare rights movement — the boldest grassroots movement to address household labor and decent living standards for all women. As Cobble herself argues, feminist struggles led by women of color and working-class women are often not recognized as such, in part because they frequently occur through co-ed organizing and in part because, in communities where men have been devastated by poverty, exploitation, and the criminal justice system, formal equality between the sexes looks woefully inadequate, if not downright undesirable.

But what if formal equality was never the goal? What if, instead, feminism, with its recognition of the need for care — like socialism, antiracism, and environmentalism — means understanding and achieving the conditions for human flourishing? In this light, all the most vital movements today — Fight for 15, the climate justice struggle, the fight for universal health care, organizing against police violence and mass incarceration — are feminist, and not only because of the central role that women play in them.

If, in the wreckage of the last year, we see a renewed effort to confront the care work crisis by fighting for universal child care and health care, parental leave, shorter working hours, a basic income, and a living wage for caregivers, perhaps the perennial fretting about feminism's future will be replaced by visions of the future that feminism will help make possible for all of us.

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UNITED STATES

FEMINISM

FEMINISM / SOCIALIST FEMINISM