

# Lucy Delap: Feminisms: A Global History

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In *Feminisms: A Global History*, historian Lucy Delap provides an engaging and innovative account of the global history of feminism, analysing the progressive redefinition of feminism and its connection to various historical developments all around the world. Examining “*how unexpected linkages and resonances emerge across different feminist generations and epochs*,” (p. 3) this book offers a whole new perspective on the evolution of feminist movements globally, contesting the traditional simplistic ‘feminist waves’ narrative as well as the scanty perception of feminism as one united movement.

The author of this book, Lucy Delap, is an expert on gender history and the history of feminism. Delap is a fellow of Murray Edwards College at the University of Cambridge and a fellow of the Royal Historical Society. She works on projects related to the intersection of feminism and capitalism. Even though she focusses mainly on modern British history within her research, this particular publication is precious for illustrating her historical account with case studies from a diverse range of countries. She draws examples from various sources – from the writings of the Japanese anarchist Sentaro Kemuyama, who lived in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to a Dior fashion show catwalk in Paris in 2017. This great richness serves to confirm the author’s key claim that “*histories of feminism cannot be located only within single nation states, regions, or empires*” (p. 18) and opens the eyes of an average reader who has heard solely about the Western suffragette movements and maybe recent demonstrations against gender-based violence. Hence, it can be supposed that the author’s main aim is to enrich the readers’ understanding of feminism with a broad array of examples of various global versions and branches of feminism.

Nevertheless, the book is not special only in its geographical scope but also in its structure. Delap adopted a revolutionary approach in that she analyses the history of feminism through various themes and objects which might seem unrelated to feminism at first but carry important linkages. This unique structure enables the author to cover in just one chapter examples ranging from Ibsen’s *Doll’s House*, Maoist attempts to socialize motherhood, and Claudie Broyelle’s *La Moitié du Ciel* to the tensions between Domitila Barrios de Chungara and Betty Friedan at the Mexico City World Conference on Women in 1975. Therefore, the reader gains a deeper understanding of the complexity of feminism, its presence in various domains, and its fascinating interconnections with many different

phenomena. Instead of following a chronological order, the chapters deal with themes of dreams, ideas, spaces, objects, looks, feelings, actions, and songs. As was already mentioned, these words might seem unrelated to feminism but the author uses them as umbrella terms for her analysis demonstrating the presence of feminism in almost all spheres of life.

Since feminism can be a problematic and emotionally loaded concept, the author dedicates the introduction to an explanation of the various ways in which this term can be approached. She adopts an original method defining feminism as an activity rather than as an ideology, saying, *“Feminism is best understood as an overlapping, internally complex set of actions, questions, and demands that has been in formulation since the eighteenth century or even earlier. Its concerns change over time”* (p. 3). This definition makes feminism more neutral and inclusive, accentuating its social mobilisation feature. Moreover, it captures the changing nature of feminism as this concept evolves along with the social norms of a given society. This definition further corroborates that the author is well aware of the importance of discourse. She analyses the narratives surrounding feminism and their meaning for various groups as well. Delap explains that feminism is sometimes *“rejected as too divisive, too Euro-American, too white, too middle-class”* (p. 5). However, whichever label we apply to feminism (women’s awakening, *feminizumu*, women’s liberation, *femmes en lutte*, intersectional feminism), this just supports Delap’s claim that there are different interacting types of feminism, even though we might sometimes focus only on the Western perception of this term. As Delap says, there should be *“no assumption that feminism looks the same in each place or time”* (p. 5).

Although the author does not provide a linear chronological evolution of feminism in this book, the mosaic that her book assembles demonstrates how feminism has changed throughout the centuries. Delap adopts a critical approach and she does not hide the problems and limitations of feminism. She identifies early feminism’s limited scope, as it focussed mainly on upper-class white women. Moreover, she describes how feminism in the United States in the 1950s still struggled to include both white and black women. As the African American feminist Frances Beal mentioned, African American women faced *“very specific problems that have to be spoken to”* (p. 91) and they could not expect white feminists to advocate for black women’s needs. The same holds true for lesbian women or transwomen, whose discrimination in the patriarchal order is still disregarded

by some feminists even nowadays. Delap mentions that transwomen were denied entry to some feminist events, such as the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which enforced a strict women-only policy while not recognising transwomen as women. Nevertheless, the author delineates the evolution of feminism captured by terms like 'intersectionality,' which was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which demonstrate that feminism transforms. Through this development, Delap also demonstrates the flexibility and fluidity of the term 'feminism' since for Generations Y and Z, intersectionality is often a natural and inseparable component of feminism.

Delap does not avoid even the global North-South divide. She concedes the dominant position of hegemonic feminism, which has *"often been associated with a Western model of emancipated womanhood"* (p. 6). She describes the controversy centred around hegemonic feminism at the Mexico City conference in 1975, where the Bolivian tin miner's wife Domitila Barrios de Chungara opposed the famous American feminist Betty Friedan, who attempted *"to speak for other women, and to subsume their needs under a North American version of feminism"* (p. 254). This tension challenges the way too idealistic narratives of one united feminism sometimes promoted by international organisations dealing with women's rights. Delap's account of this situation in the section 'Feelings' further proves the usefulness of the organisation of her book, as it is detached from 'the four waves of feminism' narrative since she can combine events from various parts of the world. Moreover, this division enables the author to delve deeper into the feminist anti-colonial movements, such as the large protests of 1929 in Nigeria led by Igbo women against the British rule, as well. This example also outlines the social justice components of feminism. Delap mentions Ransome-Kuti's understanding of *"women's liberation being threaded in the liberation of the oppressed and poor majority of the people in Nigeria"* (p. 121). While these movements demonstrate great inclusivity, though they are sometimes ideologically intertwined with and/or discredited by communism, the author also shows the limited global understanding of Western feminists, who sometimes make racist or orientalist remarks. An orientalist concept introduced by the British feminist Eleanor Rathbone can serve as an example of this: she talked about the 'Turk complex', which she described as a universal mental patriarchy system in which men seek to maintain power over their wives and children.

The account of feminisms provided by Delap is valuable also in the sense that she actively includes the cooperation of men with women in the feminist struggle, even though they are otherwise often left out from feminist texts. She describes how some male thinkers, such as Lewis Henry Morgan, August Bebel, or Friedrich Engels, influenced women's perception of patriarchy and contributed to feminism's greater inclusiveness, especially in regard to women with a working class background. Moreover, Delap portrays men as allies of feminism, mentioning the 'anti-sexist men's groups' which aimed to offer an alternative to patriarchy. This interest was complemented by research on 'patripsych' (or what Rathbone called the 'Turk-complex') and masculinities, which aimed to explain the structures of gender relations and create names, such as hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity, for well-known behaviours. Since labelling a certain phenomenon is an important first step in tackling it, these developments were significant. Furthermore, the active support of feminism from gay men, who also suffered under patriarchal prejudices, gave feminist movements greater momentum. Nevertheless, even though Delap dedicates a subsection to this topic, she could definitely include the male perception and engagement in feminism more to demonstrate that feminism is not only about women's actions.

Although the author aims to provide a global narrative of feminism, she leaves out some regions from her analysis, which slightly limits her objective. The whole region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is represented in her book solely by the case of the punk-rock protest group Pussy Riot, which seems insufficient considering its rich history and the large potential for discussions about the intersection and impact of communism and women's rights in the CEE region. Moreover, Central Asia is fully omitted from the book. This might be caused by the small demographic size of the region (the population of the region is 75 million). Nevertheless, this still means that some points of view and versions of feminism are not represented in the book despite its richness. Hence, even though the author is trying to include as many countries as possible, her account is somewhat regionally unbalanced.

This book provides an accessible and comprehensive introduction to the global struggle for equality between women and men. Its contribution is even more valuable in the times of the pandemic, which poses a serious challenge to gender equality all around the world and makes feminism

even more crucial. *Feminisms: A Global History* captures the successful (and less successful) tactics feminists used to convey their message for centuries, which can inspire contemporary activists, who (unfortunately) often fight for the same rights that were demanded by feminists 100 years ago. Moreover, this book could contribute to finally changing the Westernised perception of feminism as something uniquely Western that must be exported to 'less-developed parts of the world.' It democratises the feminist narrative and reveals the intrinsic global nature of feminism, which makes it more inclusive. Delap suggests in *Feminisms: A Global History* that "for some women and men, feminism has proved a transformative, explosive, life changing way of seeing the world" (p. 8). Her book serves as an excellent, engaging, and eye-opening guide into this new way of seeing the world.

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Kristina Šusová is a student of Social Sciences and Middle Eastern Studies at Science Po Paris. She is currently co-operating with the Institute of International Relations Prague as a Research Assistant. Her research interests include the areas of European foreign policy, regional politics in the Middle East, and feminist foreign policy. In the past, she conducted a research about women in the public space in Cairo, Egypt under the organisation Babel Initiative.