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### Review/Reseña

Jane S. Jaquette, ed. *Feminist Agendas and Democracy in Latin America*.  
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## **Latin American Feminisms: Progress, Strategies, and Challenges under Democracy**

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The period of democratic transitions in Latin America was marked by high hopes that the end of authoritarian military regimes would help bring social justice and respect for human rights. To that effect, democratically elected governments in the region signed international commitments and passed numerous progressive laws in the last few decades. Yet in the new millennium, persistent, and even widening, social inequalities in various Latin American countries hint at a significant chasm between the letter of the law and the actualities of people's lives. Gender inequality is one of the realms in which the conditions of access to, and

exercise of, democratic citizenship in Latin America can be tested. The authors in *Feminist Agendas and Democracy in Latin America* take up this task by examining women's movements' inroads, setbacks, and remaining challenges in terms of reducing, and ultimately ending, gender inequities.

While valuable scholarship on Latin American women's activism has focused on iconic figures and organizations that emerged in the context of state terrorism and revolutionary struggles in the 70s and 80s, this book offers vital analyses of key political developments since the end of the military dictatorships and the armed conflicts that afflicted various Latin American countries. As the volume's editor, Jane S. Jaquette, and other feminist scholars point out, women's mobilization helped pave the way toward new democratic systems in Latin America. Now the time is ripe to assess how much of the energy and efforts that women's movements invested in the democratic period have translated into meaningful changes for diverse women's lives and for their enjoyment of full citizenship status.

The authors in this book explore several approaches that Latin American women's organizations have used to advance women's rights using the tools of electoral democracies. For example, we learn about feminist organizing to repeal laws that blatantly supported women's subordination and to demand institutional and legislative changes that would actually promote gender equity. Some essays also examine different strategies that feminist activists have deployed to ensure the fulfillment of gender policy and law, such as litigation at the national and transnational levels, or the production of analyses and reports that compare governmental commitments with specific, measurable indicators of progress.

The volume presents a useful update of major political, institutional, and legal changes concerning women's conditions in Latin America (for instance, political participation, domestic violence, reproductive rights, access to education, and family standing). Moreover, it offers incisive accounts about the relationship between such outcomes and women's political organizing and advocacy. While feminist groups and perspectives are often marginalized from the centers of political power, this book demonstrates the continued significance of feminist local and

transnational activism to change laws, transform cultures, hold governments accountable to their promises, and overhaul various fields of power inequality. The book also shows some of the complexities that feminists have had to grapple with as they organized in shifting political and economic environments marked by neoliberal restructuring. In such contexts, the formal recognition of citizenship rights for women has gone “hand in hand with increasing social polarization, and unprecedented levels of social inequality, and a loss of social and economic rights” (Kohen 83).

The book addresses timely issues and women’s movements’ interventions in selected Latin American countries (Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, and Peru) as well as transnational activism in the World Social Forum, the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, and venues for regional cooperation in the design of social accountability instruments. Introductory and concluding essays by experienced editor, Jane S. Jaquette, help frame these essays both historically and conceptually. One of the overarching themes that Jaquette identifies is the relationship of feminists with institutions and the state. While Jaquette recognizes the value of grassroots organizing outside mainstream institutional structures, she emphasizes the importance of feminist engagement with established institutions—even in the context of imperfect democracies—to achieve feminist goals. In her own words,

[p]olitics today is a process of negotiation and compromise over outcomes that ultimately only states can provide. This process needs the generative dynamism, plural perspectives, and utopian idealism of social movements, both local and global. But it also requires respect for “politics as usual,” for organizations and institutions, and for the predictability that makes it possible for people to plan and hope. Feminists must be committed to the institutional means, as well as the utopian ends, of social justice. (Jaquette 216-217)

Consistent with this claim, different authors in the book examine both feminist work within institutions and feminist challenges to “politics as usual.” The topics addressed in the volume are relevant and instructive. A number of essays illuminate the interplay between legal, judicial, and political systems in recent years. These include chapters on the differential effects of “quota laws” on women’s political representation in Argentina

and Brazil (Jutta Marx, Jutta Borner, and Mariana Caminotti), efforts to incorporate a “gender perspective” into truth commissions dealing with human rights abuses in Peru (Julissa Mantilla Falcón), and Argentine and Brazilians feminists’ use of litigation as a strategy to change legislation and to ensure its implementation (Beatriz Kohen and Flávia Piovesan respectively). We also learn about feminist organizing and influence (or lack thereof) in relation to democratically elected governments, including those of Michelle Bachelet, the first woman president in Chile (Marcela Ríos Tobar), and controversial presidential figure Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (Gioconda Espina). In an ever more globalized world, the need for feminists to link local struggles to transnational solidarity efforts is demonstrated by three insightful essays: one on how feminist demands are negotiated, confronted, marginalized, and incorporated at the World Social Forum (Virginia Vargas); another one on cross-border organizing to stop domestic violence against migrant women on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border (Kathleen Staudt and Gabriela Montoya); and a third essay on practices of *control ciudadano* (social watch) implemented in several countries in the region (Teresa Valdés and Alina Donoso).

The collection as a whole covers some of the milestones that Latin American feminisms have achieved either through direct interventions in institutions or through more subtle, long-standing, and cumulative activist work to change social consciousness, cultural practices, material conditions, and political milieus. For instance, as a result of the quota law and critical monitoring of its implementation, Argentina now boasts one of the highest rates of women’s parliamentary representation in the world. Thanks to human rights and feminist litigation at the international level, Brazil has adopted more purposeful national legislation and more comprehensive (and hopefully effective) institutional approaches to confront violence against women. Truth commissions and courts dealing with human rights violations related to political violence are slowly, but increasingly, incorporating difference and equality arguments so that the women affected can obtain a greater measure of justice. The breaking of hard glass ceilings in Chile is not only reflected in the election of a woman president, but also in her commitment to gender parity in her cabinet and

other sectors of her administration. When able to work together, listen to each other, and put aside conflicting party loyalties, activist women in Venezuela successfully pushed for laws to improve the plight of women as workers and mothers and to address gender-based violence. Latin American feminist cross-border cooperation has also helped shape international agendas put forth by governments, international agencies, and diverse social movements. Some of this feminist collaboration has involved “distant networking among well-resourced activists” with access to computers and money to travel. Yet other noteworthy cross-national networks—such as those tying activists and advocates around the U.S.-Mexico border—are characterized by solidarity among geographically close, and at the same differently situated, social actors (Staudt and Montoya 187).

Among the major themes that Jaquette considers in her concluding chapter is the evolution of the concept of “difference” in Latin American feminist debates, including how “difference” is incorporated in feminist articulations of women’s rights, and how difference-based arguments can be complementary to equality-based positions. Beyond this, she states that “‘difference’ has now acquired a much broader meaning in Latin American feminist analysis. Feminists argue that the inclusion of women helped open the door to the political recognition of many formerly marginalized groups, such as Afro-Brazilians, indigenous peoples, youth, and gays and lesbians” (209). Still, an issue that remains to be more fully addressed in future works is how Latin American feminists deal with difference (and more precisely social inequalities) among women. Some of the essays in the volume, such as Virginia Vargas’s, make a point to acknowledge the intersections between various forms of oppression that affect and implicate women in different ways. She mentions that “discriminations by race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, and sexual orientation are linked as constitutive elements of a nucleus of domination” (151). This notion is important given that feminist agendas have too often been framed in ways that reflect the standpoint of an implicitly normative feminist subject—often middle-class, heterosexual, and with ethnoracial privilege—who decides what are the real “women’s issues” vis-à-vis those of “other” groups

and movements. The struggles and perspectives of diverse women experiencing racism, heterosexism, and class exploitation, for example, are not consistently incorporated in feminist analyses and instead are seen as quasi external to feminist concerns.<sup>1</sup>

A related question that the book raises is how to integrate the knowledge and initiatives of professional “gender experts” with those of grassroots activists organizing at the community and popular movements levels, including street mobilization. These, of course, are not necessarily mutually exclusive propositions, as highly trained professionals can be, and sometimes are, committed to grassroots organizing as part of their feminist work. While joint activities do not erase power differentials among women, dialogue and organizing that bring together women from different sectors can lead to more inclusive and effective feminist agendas. A number of the strategies discussed in the book require considerable education, technical knowledge, social capital, and/or resources. Such is the case with national and international judicial proceedings, creation of expert reports on governmental actions, development of indexes and statistical analyses, and political maneuvering in the halls where elected officials operate. These are necessary activities, but ones that not all women have access to, particularly those without resources and know-how. According to Valdés and Donoso, strategies of social watch grounded in participatory processes—such as those characterizing the construction of *Indices de Compromiso Cumplido* (Indexes of Commitments Fulfilled)—have the potential to bridge the

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<sup>1</sup> The question of difference and inequality among women is a thorny issue not just for Latin American feminists; it has been a source of spirited debate in other places, too. In the United States, see for example, bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), 139-67; and Patricia Hill Collins, “Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection,” in *Privilege: A Reader*, eds. Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2003), 331-48. In Latin American contexts, see Ochy Curiel, “Identidades Esencialistas o Construcción de Identidades Políticas: El Dilema de las Feministas Afrodescendientes,” *Construyendo Nuestra Interculturalidad*, 5.5 (Noviembre 2009), [www.interculturalidad.org](http://www.interculturalidad.org); and Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso, *Escritos de Una Lesbiana Oscura: Reflexiones Críticas sobre Feminismo y Política de Identidad en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: En la Frontera, 2007).

distance between women from different social locations and create effective instruments that more robustly reflect the priorities of various groups.

Seemingly intractable tensions and fragmentations have sometimes undermined Latin American feminist work and have impeded successful capitalization of political opportunities, as some of the essays in the volume illustrate (e.g. Espina's piece on Venezuela and Ríos Tobar's chapter on Chile). Yet conflict can also be productive and, if successfully navigated, can yield new insights and modes of action. Acknowledging, understanding, and working through differences toward common goals are essential steps for the success of feminist organizing and analysis. This has been and remains a challenge for feminists in Latin America and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The book exposes some of the sources of contention facing Latin American feminisms as well as the opportunities for solidarity that can help to build more just, inclusive, and democratic societies.

*Feminist Agendas and Democracy in Latin America* is a valuable text for scholars and students of Latin American feminisms interested in some of the most pressing issues of the day. It assembles accessible and compelling essays by authors with expertise in law and the social sciences, and with personal experiences of political involvement and activism in the contexts they write about. This collection is a fine contribution to the literature on women's movements in Latin America and promises to be a critical reference for dialogues about the future of feminism and gender equity in the region.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, María C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice,'" *Women's Studies International Forum* 6.6 (1983), 573-81; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).