

EDITORIAL

Feminist Politics and Activism in Reactionary Eras

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INTRODUCTION

We started thinking about this issue while the world was astir with many instances of intransigent power going head-to-head with grassroots resistance (even though it was fresh in our memories following the ‘Arab Spring’ that mass uprising could soon lead to political repression). In the time that this special issue went from conception to completion, much has changed in the world of social movements, reactionary politics, and the impact of feminism: from manifest erosion of the rule of law, dislocations of war and the increase in socioeconomic inequalities, to growing populist anger across the political spectrum expressed in massive marches and State bans on gatherings, and the iteration of gender-based violence as a palpable force in the world. But the salience of feminist political influence continues to be a critical question within and beyond academia, ever more given public discussions of gender and power.

One can’t help wondering whether focusing on feminist politics is an act of wishful nostalgia. Given proliferating assertions of post-feminism and feminist enthusiasm for neo-liberal agendas as well as a steady stream of challenges to mainstream feminism based on exclusions of race, caste, class, age, gender or sexuality, is feminism redundant, stuck or past its time? Including forms of women’s activism and identification that contest the term ‘feminism’ or challenge its organising thrust allows us to think with alternate discourses through which gendered resistance is asserted and claims to belonging are framed (Mahmood, 2004). However, there are also indications that feminism is an emergent, revitalised discourse in the face of rising reactionary forces across the globe. Have feminist movements been, or can they be, unifying forces across divides of race, class, caste, nationality or religion, or have they fallen short in prioritising gender as a central problem? Are they rejuvenated, or transformed, by the fierce opposition they encounter?

We sent out the call for papers as a way to take stock of feminist politics within this charged landscape: to consider the historical and contemporary effects of feminism as a global force. This necessarily involved reckoning with who might speak in the name of feminism and who marks themselves as outside of it. In an expansive definition, ‘feminisms’ are variously understood as:

... an idea, a set of political convictions, a mode of identification with other women, a way of being a woman, a collective identity available to men and women, a form of political mobilisation, a policy agenda, a legacy, a means of forging the ‘we’ that Beauvoir thought women lacked, a strategy for forging alliances and building allegiance, a praxis, a vision of alternative possibilities, an imagined community, a process of creating something new, a tactic for transforming social relations, an inclusive, participatory politics, and an expansive conception of justice encompassing economic distribution, political rights and liberties, collective responsibility, and dispute resolution. (Hawkesworth, 2006: 25).

But in being thus expansive, how are exclusions to be demarcated? Identifying with feminist action is a strategic asset and affirmative strength for many (Sinha Roy, Tice, Rios and Kano in this volume), while others reject the word as alien, imperialist or hegemonic, in some cases too direct and pragmatically dangerous (Cheema and Hossaini in this volume) (Hawkesworth, 2006: 25-26). Living in reactionary and repressive times might mean that feminism is hybridised, with people taking up new identifications and alliances that blur boundaries (Mason in this volume). Amrita Basu’s new volume differentiates between ‘*women’s movement*’ to describe organised social movements to challenge gender equality, including not only autonomous women’s groups but also other social

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movements in which women have made feminist demands,' and '*feminism* to describe struggles that have the same goals but need not be organized women's movements' (Basu 2017: 5,6). This issue includes feminisms under all of these categories, plus other contexts where the term feminism is under erasure but where questions of gender equality are being negotiated.

Can we conceptualise meaningful solidarities across difference? We aim to understand the relationship between global, national and local feminisms, and map the connections and contradictions within these scales. Local feminist campaigns have called upon global norms and engaged in transnational advocacy, while groups have sought to do transversal international work through the UN Conferences and beyond. In conversation with the efflorescence of texts variously examining women's movements and feminist movements in local, national, regional and transnational scope, the ambivalent effects of globalisation and the relevance of human rights frameworks (Naples and Desai, 2002; Ferree and Tripp, 2006; Hawkesworth, 2006; Merry, 2006; Tripp, Casimir et al., 2008; Basu, 2017), these essays traverse the scales from local to transnational. Not only do we decolonise and de-centre feminism by looking at its forms within and between nation-states, but we understand it as a contested discursive site through which people negotiate many other identities.

We also interrogate the impacts of feminist visions and reforms. Do feminist notions of harm or well-being so infuse global and national laws and policies that 'governance feminism' (Halley et al., 2006) comes to operate as a form of power, or does the apparent prominence of feminist claims mask how little material effect they can have? With women 'simultaneously hailed as resourceful providers, reliable micro-entrepreneurs, and cosmopolitan citizens and positioned as disposable domestics, the exploited global workforce and as displaced, devalued and disenfranchised diasporic citizens' (Hawkesworth, 2006: 23), discourses of gender are obviously useful as strategies of global neoliberal governance. How do feminisms respond to the growing inequalities of class, region, race and indigeneity generated by such governance? Can feminist movements thrive within neoliberal regimes, or are they inevitably institutionalised or co-opted?

This special issue presents a portrait of the complicated valences through which feminism as a global force is challenged, vernacularised, inhabited and enacted. It presents both historical instances of feminist struggles to be a unifying force and contemporary dilemmas of feminist governance and activism. The papers show the reception of feminism filtered through various politics and identities, negotiations by feminists *and* by those covertly interpellating feminist ideas. Sinha Roy's theoretical essay represents the broadest scale, characterising transnational and regional feminisms through temporality, as an alternative to the spatial as the inevitable locus for examining movements. Rios and Tice's essays examine feminist politics in a national space where it is a well-established presence, in US movements' attempts to build institutions and alliances: in portraying the ways that critical goals of solidarity and intersectionality are challenged by local hierarchies of politics, privileges of race, class and national identity and by intransigent State dynamics. They depict both the transformative effects of movement work on identity, and the difficulties of enacting structural change. In the case of Russia, feminist politics continues to jostle for visibility and validation: Mason's close analysis of the range of political positions in Russia tracks how feminist activism is received and deployed through many kinds of identities and claims made against state repression. Kano's essay on Japan reminds us in counterpoint that the category of 'women's interests' is advantageous to shore up political and economic power for governments without necessarily empowering those it claims to help, that feminist movements must be vigilant in attending to forms of change. Hosseini's and Cheema's essays reveal the subversive effects of feminism in places where it dare not reveal a strong public presence: in the poetics of Iranian writers who create a feminine imaginary that defies masculinist representations, and through hesitant, even resistant student conversations about talk shows and real crime shows related to gender-based violence that are a new feature of Pakistani television.

In 'Bodies, Boundaries and Genealogies of Connection: Locating Networks of Feminism(s) in India/South Asia', Mallarika Sinha Roy focuses on the relationship between local and global women's activism and women's movements through foregrounding their temporal dimensions. Using a Foucauldian genealogical approach to examine case studies that span over three centuries and across two continents, Sinha Roy calls for understanding regional feminist politics in ways that are not confined by national borders and territorial boundaries.

In 'The Politics of U.S. Feminist Internationalism and Cuba', Karen Tice examines the solidarity activism of the Venceremos Brigades (VB), an anti-imperialist radical education and Cuban solidarity project, established by members of the Students for Democratic Society in 1969. Tice's analysis of the ways that these feminists negotiated tensions arising from intersectional relations of power in both the United States and Cuba offers valuable insights into the building of sustainable feminist networks across time and space.

In 'Co-option and Organisational Survival: Risks and Opportunities of State Attachment within the United States Feminist Antiviolence Movement', Aisha Rios explores the tenuous relationship between social movement organisations and the state through her extensive fieldwork at the 'Antiviolence Commission' (AVC) a quasi-state organisation that tackles domestic violence through a 'feminist, survivor-centered lens'. Rios details the process

through which AVC was politicised through the state's attempts to co-opt the organisation, and ways that AVC attempted to resist by appropriating various forms of state power to its own ends.

Jessica Mason adds an important dimension to analyses of the 'punk prayer' intervention by the feminist punk group Pussy Riot at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow in 'Pussy Provocations: Feminist Protest and Anti-Feminist Resurgence in Russia', examining the performance as a 'provocation'; 'a type of action that violates a norm in ways that seemingly *compel* one to respond, from the perspective of the person who has been provoked' (Mason, p. 2) that became an agent of political action. By shifting the focus from the act itself to a range of social responses from anti-feminist religious groups to anti-Putin political opposition groups to ambivalent feminist responses, the paper helps us to better understand the process through which certain activist events become the ground of social ferment.

How does a neoliberal government attempt to take advantage of feminists? In 'Womenomics and Acrobatics: Why Japanese Feminists Remain Skeptical About Feminist State Policy', Ayako Kano explores the ways that Japan's current neoliberal government selectively promotes women's activities for its ends—to boost the GDP, halt the decline of birth rate, and lift Japan's international standing. Based on her examination of state policies and feminists' responses, and by placing the current controversy within a longer history of feminism in Japan, Kano offers some possible directions for Japanese feminists to ensure lasting gains.

Mahroksadat Hosseini's close reading of Iranian poetry demonstrates that social activism is not always in a physical space. In 'Feminist Culture and Politics in Iranian Women's Post-Revolutionary Poetry', Hosseini draws our attention to ways that women poets in Iran have used their writing to make important feminist interventions into patriarchal culture, from identifying repression to imagining emancipation. Unlike the earlier generation of women who focused on conventional themes such as mothers and wives and depicted women as passive objects of desire, these feminist poets have given agency and sexuality to the female voice.

Munira Cheema examines another resistant space influenced by feminist discourse and the visibility of issues of gender-based violence. While religious conformity mandating a rigid gender order is a dominant public force in Pakistan, the new globalised space of varied television channels including call-in talk shows and true-crime shows functions as a feminist public sphere. In 'Talk shows in Pakistan TV Culture: Engaging Women as Cultural Citizens', Cheema analyses young female viewers' sympathetic, ambivalent or resistant responses to interactive TV that deal with topics such as religion, social issues, and crime as a form of cultural citizenship, a way for women to gain more awareness of inequalities and discriminations that surround them as well as to negotiate the constraints and possibilities of their lives.

As these summaries might indicate, our answer to the question about whether feminism is redundant, stuck or past its time is that it lives and morphs in many unexpected forms. We present these papers in the hope of encouraging conversations about the meanings, scope and futures of feminist politics and activism.

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