

1-1-2010

Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Engendering Social Justice, Democratizing Citizenship

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Recommended Citation

Dittloff, Scott Ph.D. (2010) "Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Engendering Social Justice, Democratizing Citizenship," *Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice*: Vol. 4 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://athenaeum.uiw.edu/verbumincarnatum/vol4/iss1/9>

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***Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean:
Engendering Social Justice, Democratizing Citizenship***

Rutgers University Press (April 23, 2010)
Edited by Elizabeth Maier and Nathalie Lebon

Book Review by Scott Dittloff, Ph.D.

Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Engendering Social Justice, Democratizing Citizenship, edited by Elizabeth Maier and Nathalie Lebon, is a multi-author compilation book that deals with wide ranging issues of particular importance to women throughout Latin America and the circum-Caribbean. The mainland is much more thoroughly covered than the islands, although the usual countries (Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico) from the Caribbean do make an appearance in Part II. Interestingly, some of the most rigorous social science methodology appears in the articles on the Caribbean.

The book is broken down into several sections, not all of which seem distinct. There are two introductory chapters by each of the editors that provide excellent, though very normative, discussions of the substance of the subsequent chapters in the context of an overview of feminist theory. Part II addresses women, families, and economic inequality. Part III focuses on women's political behavior in and out of politics. The authors address grassroots activism in the mothers and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and urban and rural activism in Guatemala to the role and prominence of women in political institutions in Nicaragua. Part IV also addresses women's activism but from a perspective of specific sub-groups (racial, lesbian, and indigenous groups). The title of Part V refers to shaping public policy (which does not differ from the goals in Part IV). Part VI deals with feminist agency from local, regional, and global perspectives. Part VII reflections based on the myriad cases provided throughout the book.

Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean could be more accurately titled as feminist activism in Latin America and the Caribbean. This book takes a very normative approach to the exploration of feminist activism in Latin America. It is important in terms of highlighting the extent of feminist

activities in Latin America. It is also very useful in laying out the range of feminist concerns and feminist ideology. One gets a very good description of what feminist theory is and how it is applicable. Yet, the authors almost universally put a feminist agenda ahead of solid social science research methodology. This is particularly apparent when conclusions of the different authors constantly use the word "should" when summarizing the significance of the issue or activity they are writing about. The book as a whole is geared towards promoting the feminist agenda and does not have broader applicability to society.

The book may be limited in scope in terms of geography but can be seen as a more general discussion of feminism. The reason may well be that if feminism can be successful in Latin America, with its prevalence of machismo, it can be successful anywhere. Feminist theory has many sub-currents. Liberal feminism focuses on individual equality and the need for legal and social changes that would enable women's equality. Success is seen largely by the numbers of women in positions previously occupied by men, especially powerful positions. A good portion of the book addresses issues related to liberal feminism, focusing on the actions of women in a very male dominated region. Chapters on Haiti, Nicaragua, Argentina, and Venezuela highlight the struggles women have had and continue to have to make a difference and participate in politics.

Radical or socialist feminism focuses more on the socioeconomic structure of society than on individual success. Socialist feminists contend that women are marginalized by a capitalist system that gives the lion's share of power and capital to men. Until the system is changed to redistribute wealth and power, women will continue to be marginalized. This change will not become manifest unless women work together to bring about this change. The sum total of the book points in the direction of socialist feminism.

Third Wave feminism is popular among younger women. Similar to liberal feminism, Third Wave feminism is very individualistic. While not rejecting political activism, Third Wave feminism is focused more on the individual as the key to social change. Third Wave feminism focuses on the construction of individual identities and promotes women defining themselves as they wish not how traditional society would have them be defined. When the authors discuss changing gender roles in Cuba, single family households, and

specifically feminist political activism they most assertively highlight Third Wave feminism. In one respect, these are, the strongest sections of the anthology. The authors highlight issues of particular concern to women and show that despite decades of rhetoric about changing attitudes toward women's roles in society, little has really changed. Women are still socially, politically, and economically marginalized but are often looked to maintain the family structure. This is problematic in that women want more control over their fertility and their personal identity that may very well not be compatible with ideas of traditional family structures. In another respect, the authors deemphasize the more traditional marginalization of women and assert that women's primary concerns are family planning (mainly the right to abortion) and lesbianism. Those women (in particular) who have (relatively) more conservative political views are looked at as being reactionary and are dismissed almost out of hand as being behind the times and irrelevant as well as a detriment to the cause of women's rights.

The book has its methodological and theoretical flaws, but excels in highlighting the practical concerns of women and feminists as well as providing a detailed, yet accessible, explanation of feminist theory and objectives. The range of topics covered in the book in and of itself performs a great service in educating the reader of the extent of feminist interest and foci. It also admirably sets out the extent of feminist contributions to politics and human rights (and how far women's rights have yet to go to achieve equality). It is the objectives, or the normative element of the book, that I take the most issue with. The authors all are strong supporters of the tenets of feminism. They are trying to get readers to sympathize with feminist ideals. Moreover, they are, in a very real sense trying to create, and create acceptance for, a new view of the social world, but in the process they are guilty of over-generalization—blaming men, and patriarchy, as well as asserting a concerted and conscious effort at gender oppression, as the cause for all of the problems and issues that confront feminists. They also refuse to accept the legitimacy of women who choose not to adhere to feminist doctrine.

Race, Place, and Environmental Justice after Hurricane Katrina

Westview Press; (February 10, 2009)

Edited by Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright

Book Review by Donna Meyer, Ph.D.

Hurricane Katrina and its disastrous aftermath forced the Nation to acknowledge shocking socioeconomic contradictions that are frequently masked from the national consciousness. Public stereotypes of New Orleans were typically formed by glamorous “Big Easy” media shots taken at celebrations like Mardi Gras and jazz festivals. One might argue that all U.S. citizens share some blame for not recognizing the racial disparities and fully understanding that socioeconomic injustices do lead to social disaster. It may be less fair to expect that the average citizen should have been aware that the levee system was so precarious and vulnerable. The appalling events provided a powerful lesson on the importance of maintaining both our human and physical infrastructures. The disaster was and continues to be a compelling example of the Environmental Justice imperative.

This book presents the “proceedings” of the two symposia held at Dillard University in October 2006 and May 2008. Both the participants and the place are well suited to contribute to this comprehensive examination of all aspects of the disaster. The knowledgeable authors of each chapter are qualified to critically review and dissect the various causes and effects of long term injustice and explain the information in a manner that deepens our understanding.

The editors, Drs. Bullard and Wright, are eminently qualified. Bullard is widely known as the “Father of Environmental Justice”; he has extensively studied environmental racism. Wright is an advocate for environmental justice and founder and head of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Dillard University. Dillard University, an old, well established black institution located in the Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans, received extensive flood damage. For twelve months after the storm, the University was housed in the Hilton Riverside Hotel.

A vast trove of information has already been published about the storm and its aftermath. It is often difficult, even for those who sincerely strive, to understand whose opinions are being represented and whether information strikes an appropriate balance between resources and the needs of those most vulnerable. What this publication adds is that it so clearly attempts to represent the opinions and viewpoints of the majority poor black population of New Orleans and the

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immediate environs. While no population is homogeneous, these studies do strive for scientific validity. These writers present solid data that questions the legitimacy of the many existing studies and plans either because the government is perceived as paternalistic and corrupt or because the process did not incorporate opinions of the “silent underserved” or the many displaced Orleanians.

As would be expected, multiple authors create considerable variation in writing styles. Several chapters are engrossing reading (Sanyika and King stand out); most are crammed with data and not meant for the recreational reader. The thorough analyses and extensive references produce a very valuable resource for anyone engaged in social justice efforts anywhere; it should be considered required reading for those helping to rebuild or assisting the dislocated post Katrina.

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