

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Millie Thayer, *Making Transnational Feminism: Rural Women, NGO Activists, and Northern Donors in Brazil*. Perspectives on Gender Series. New York: Routledge, 2009, 256 pp. \$US 35.95 paper (978-0-415-96213-1) \$US 140.00 hardcover (978-0-415-96212-4)

Making *Transnational Feminism* is a careful and insightful study of the emergence of two distinct feminisms in the Brazilian Northeast from the 1970s to the late 1990s, their uneasy collaborations, their power relations and their transnational connections with Northern-based feminisms and donor organizations.

Thayer's study documents the history of SOS Corpo, an urban, middle-class women's movement in Recife, inspired by the 1970s North American radical feminism disseminated globally through *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. Alongside this is a companion study of the Rural Women Workers' Movement (MMTR) of the Brazilian *sertão*, a "popular" movement of poor, peasant women, and their struggle for land rights, access to rural employment, participation and voice in the local agricultural unions, and subsequent engagement with feminism. The book examines the distinct origins, class composition, and political discourses of these two feminisms, their intersecting histories, their "cross-class encounter" and its effects on the trajectory of each movement. Each is anchored in the Brazilian Northeast but separated by the urban-rural divide and chasms of class inequality, as well as distinct feminist discourses. The former emphasized "body politics," the centrality of health and reproductive rights, and ultimately gender relations, while the latter represented a gendered class politics of rural women workers actively resisting gender-based subordination in agricultural unions and class-based subordination in feminist networks.

Thayer is acutely attentive to the local context of each movement while also seeking to analyze the effects on each of asymmetrical global flows of feminist ideas, UN processes, and donor money. She is concerned to reveal both the agency of these Southern-based women's movements, with their particular class compositions and somewhat differing positions in transnational networks, and the unequal power relations in the "transnational feminist counterpublic" that unavoidably reflect the inequities of the world system. She also insightfully compares

the different capacities and resources brought to negotiations with local partners and Northern donors by Southern-based feminist NGOs on the one hand, and “grassroots” movements that emphasize popular education and mass organization over professionalization and institutional engagement on the other.

The concept of the transnational feminist counterpublic that runs through the book is central to Thayer’s argument. She draws on critical theories of the public sphere to posit the existence of a transnational feminist counterpublic, which is a “hybrid” space, constituted and sustained through bonds of solidarity while simultaneously riven through with unequal power relations. Her book is a study from within of its historical constitution and its complex contemporary dynamics from the vantage point of differently-situated Brazilian women’s movements. Various chapters foreground discursive flows, political relations and economic exchanges as power-laden linkages that weave together the transnational feminist counter-public through the latter decades of the twentieth century. The relative weight of each of these has shifted over time and Thayer worries that it is in jeopardy due to the penetration of neoliberal market logics.

Despite this sobering conclusion, Thayer’s overall analytical project is more optimistic. In arguing that intensified global flows have also made possible new forms and scales of emancipatory politics, especially for women, she contributes both empirically and analytically to the literature on globalization. She also contributes to literatures on transnational social movements, through her attention to culture — to the practices and discourses of the movements and to their constitution as effects of political relations at multiple scales. Thayer’s work is also an example of the practice and fruits of “global ethnography” and the extended case method forged by Michael Burawoy, whose student she was in the early 1990s.

It is unfortunate that this book did not appear earlier. A product of field work done through the 1990s, it is now somewhat dated. One can only hope that Thayer will write a sequel, as she is very well positioned to offer important insights on subsequent developments such as the Workers’ Party (PT) coming to power, the Lula Presidency, the eruption of the anti-globalization movement and the appearance of the World Social Forum in Brazil, the emergence of new transnational and anti-neoliberal feminisms like the World March of Women, and the effects of these on the feminisms discussed here and the politics of their transnational relations.

Although somewhat dated in terms of the field work, the theoretical resources on which it draws, and the debates in which it seeks to inter-

vene, this is a rich, interesting and well-crafted study. It is extremely readable, accessible to students, and a critical resource for for scholars of Latin American social movements, transnational feminisms, global civil society, and the transnational networks of non-governmental organizations. It will be of interest to students across the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, politics, geography and women's studies.

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