

Midgley, Clare: *Feminism and Empire. Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865*. London: Routledge 2007. ISBN: 978-0-415-25015-3; X, 206 S.

Rezensiert von: Michelle Tusan, University of Nevada Las Vegas

Claire Midgley has written a useful and well-argued study that traces the imperial origins of British feminism. Although imperial history has been the fashion in British feminist studies for over fifteen years, *Feminism and Empire* is the first book to connect these two fields in a study of the early nineteenth century. Midgley who is perhaps best known for her work on women and the anti-slavery movement is well-positioned to explore feminist connections between colony and metropole and makes a convincing case for the significance of imperialism in shaping the practice and ideology of the early feminist movement.

The rise of the second British Empire, according to Midgley, played an integral role in defining the course and content of contemporary arguments in support of and against the feminist movement. Between the period of the American Revolution in the late eighteenth century and the rise of organized feminism in the mid-nineteenth century women understood the British Empire as a place where women could assert their „moral power“ as reformers without straying too far from the British domestic ideal of separate spheres (p. 40). The British Empire thus provided a crucial space for women to exercise authority over reform campaigns, educational schemes and consumer boycott movements.

The first substantive chapter, „The Woman Question in Imperial Britain,“ offers an analysis of a constellation of both familiar and lesser known early nineteenth-century texts in order to establish the intellectual foundations of the emergent relationship between feminism and empire. Using the Enlightenment as a starting point, Midgley reads radicals like Mary Wollstonecraft against more conservative reformers like Hannah More in order to understand how white British feminist invented a colonial other in order to constitute an activist political subjectivity for British

feminists. Numerous scholars have demonstrated the important role played by Protestant Evangelicalism, Quakerism and Unitarianism in shaping early feminism. Others have emphasized the significance of radicals like Wollstonecraft as an intellectual foremother of the movement. Midgley artfully places both of these radical and conservative discourses into conversation with one another in the service of her larger argument.

The remaining chapters explore four emblematic arenas of nineteenth century women’s public activism. Studies of anti-slavery crusades, the campaign to end sati in India, missionary activity and female emigration each receive separate treatment. Here the public discourse that surrounded these worlds of women’s activism is explored in light of institution building by those who participated in reform efforts. These narratives when taken together repeat a familiar argument to historians of late nineteenth-century feminism: the British Empire provided new opportunities for middle-class women to shape their own political identities. Midgley’s evidence suggests, however, that this process happened much earlier than most historians have assumed. In „Can Women be Missionaries?: Imperial Philanthropy, Female Agency and Feminism“ Midgley reads little utilized sources on early nineteenth century missionary women to prove that women’s active involvement in the missionary movement was not an advent of the late nineteenth century. Missionary wives along with single women played an activist role in shaping debates and building support for missionary work in the British Empire. Here Midgley convincing makes the case again for the effect of this activism on the feminist movement at home.

Midgley broadens the findings of her earlier work on anti-slavery campaigns by putting this activism in a larger imperial context. Here the relatively unsuccessful campaigns by women to petition parliament for the end of the slave trade provided British women with both the institutional experience and ideological justification for arguing for their own political rights. „Sweetness and Power: the Domestic Woman and Anti-Slavery politics“ explores the „anti-

saccharite“ campaigns and places women at the center of a political movement that empowers women at the tea table (p. 42). Here she claims that women who refused to serve sugar produced by slaves worked to turn the domestic metaphor of the „sweet“ middle-class woman on its head (p. 64). Boycotting sugar showed these women the potential reach of their power as moral reformers by offering them a mode of consumer protest that fit within a well-defined set of traditional British ideals.

At the root of this study is a deeply critical portrait of feminism’s historical relationship to the British imperial project. Indeed, the study ends with a call to sisterhood for a feminist movement she sees as having been indelibly marked by the excesses and racism of European and US imperialism. Midgley takes the iconic women of Langham Place in her chapter „Feminism Colonial Emigration and the New Model Englishwoman“ to task for both their nationalism and their inability to consider how female emigration from Britain would affect indigenous populations. In this reading, women like Bessie Parkes and Barbara Bodichon are represented as complicit in the larger imperial project. Midgley’s analysis of the experience of black colonial subjects like Mary Seacole, who found herself marginalized by the British feminism movement, reveals the very deep fissures of a movement that was both for and by middle-class white women (p. 145).

Feminism and Empire provides feminist scholars with a broader context for understanding the changes of the later nineteenth century. Although several of these essays already have been published in article form, when taken together they make a clear case for including imperialism as one of the factors in determining the course of the British feminist movements. The relatively short length and affordable price makes the book accessible for classroom use and would prove important reading for graduate and undergraduate students alike.

HistLit 2009-2-154 / Michelle Tusan über Midgley, Clare: *Feminism and Empire. Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865*. London 2007, in: H-Soz-Kult 30.05.2009.