

Offen, Karen: *Globalizing Feminisms. 1789-1945*. New York: Routledge 2009. ISBN: 978-0-415-77868-8; 472 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Rachel Hynson, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Women's political history was once held captive by the study of suffrage. But scholars have since broadened their focus to include other historical events and political movements through which feminists effected change and promoted equality. *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789-1945* forms a part of this revisionist literature. Karen Offen masterfully selected articles, which engage with feminism as both an analytical approach and a subject of study. The volume's contributors document new histories, revise antiquated narratives, and employ unique methodologies in order to better apprehend the political history of women. They demonstrate that national women's movements did not exist in isolation from each other and were likewise influenced by other struggles for social justice and state rights. The collection is divided into four sections, which discuss the beginning years of feminist activism; the correlation between feminisms and religion; the formation of international feminist alliances; and the reconceptualization of historical narratives through a feminist lens. Few of the essays, however, fit into only one of these categories.

Louise Edwards' „Women's Suffrage in China: Challenging Scholarly Conventions“ is a key example of how many chapters resist categorization and tackle several themes at once. Edwards does more than challenge the traditional narrative that a Chinese suffrage movement never existed, she also questions the very methodology of suffrage research. She reveals that the enfranchisement of women did not always ensure the continued existence of suffrage rights. In the Republic of China, women achieved suffrage in 1947; however, the Chinese Communist Party nullified this gain when it came to power in 1949. For this reason, maintains Edwards, scholars must interrogate the meaning of female suffrage outside of stable, democratic nation-states. Furthermore, suffrage literature should allow space for individuals who

were conjointly feminists and nationalists, as many Chinese women both fought for suffrage rights and participated in nationalist struggles.

This intersection of women's activism and nationalism appears in other chapters as well, including „The Other 'Awakening': The Emergence of Women's Movements in the modern Middle East, 1900-1904,“ by Ellen L. Fleishmann. In her history of Middle Eastern women's activism, Fleischmann emphasizes the need to redefine feminism outside of a Western context. Middle Eastern female activists were empowered by their involvement in early-twentieth-century nationalist movements but were unable to make feminist demands, as these were considered potentially disruptive to the primary goal of national liberation. After achieving sovereignty, states such as Turkey and Iran continued to subordinate women's rights to the goals of the nation, rejecting grassroots organizing in favor of state feminism. Although female nationalists did not explicitly identify as feminists and found themselves weakened by state feminism, Fleischmann insists that „their very act of organizing“ on the basis of their shared experiences as women „constituted feminism“ (p. 172).

All contributors grappled with the question of how to define feminism, including Offen in her role as contributor. In „Was Mary Wollstonecraft a Feminist? A Comparative Re-reading of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 1792-1992*,“ Offen seeks to define feminism within a broad historical context to establish whether the word can be applied to „someone long dead“ (p. 5). If the term „feminist“ did not emerge until 1900, she queries, can Mary Wollstonecraft be defined as such? By asking this of the eighteenth-century author often recognized as the „first“ feminist, Offen demonstrates the radical nature of her query. After studying Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and comparing Wollstonecraft with her French contemporaries, Offen describes her as an activist concerned more with moral education than political rights for women. But because she sought to remedy the power imbalance between the sexes, „even retrospectively, we can bestow on Mary Wollstonecraft the broad label of

---

'feminist'" (p. 16). Moreover, Offen's careful examination of Wollstonecraft, her writing, and the French culture which fascinated her illustrates the necessity of studying the transnational influences on feminist ideologies.

The contributors to this volume situate the women's movement within a global context and provide new insight into the political history of women. Feminism did not emerge in a vacuum, a fact superbly documented by Nancy Hewitt in „Re-rooting American Women's Activism: Global Perspectives on 1848.“ She challenges the story told by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and asserts that the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention was not merely an antecedent to the U.S. suffrage amendment. According to Hewitt, the Convention was a radical gathering of activists in support of social justice. Indeed, Quaker activists like Lucretia Mott connected middle-class women's demands for political equality with the sovereignty of Mexico, the abolition of slavery, and the rights of Native Americans. By situating the Convention within the revolutionary environment of the mid-nineteenth century, Hewitt redefines the origins of modern feminism and highlights the expansive social transformations demanded by its foremothers.

In her role as editor, Offen selected essays that complicate the historical record and challenge the accepted narrative. In „Internationalizing Married Women's Nationality: The Hague Campaign of 1930,“ she demonstrates that feminism can be invigorated, even when feminists fail to achieve their goals. At the 1930 World Conference for the Codification of International Law, Latin American and North American female activists campaigned for the elimination of nationality laws which revoked the citizenship of women who married men of another nationality. Despite the passion and militancy of the pan-American activists, the Conference delegates refused to sanction the independent nationality of married women. While many scholars would label the event unsuccessful, DuBois emphasizes that the Conference encouraged future activism in the League of Nations, the United Nations, and within Latin America.

Empowerment often occurs in unexpected

places; for this reason, an entire section is dedicated to feminism and religion. Previous historians have assumed that masculine domination could not be challenged within male-dominated religions. Authors such as Padma Anagol reveal the error in this perspective. Indian Christian women were once viewed as passive beneficiaries of their husbands' conversions, but Anagol maintains that these nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century converts were dynamic agents who found empowerment in Christianity. In „Indian Christian Women and Indigenous Feminism, c. 1850 – c. 1920“ she affirms that educated, elite women ultimately converted from Hinduism because they believed that Christianity could improve the lives of all Indian women. However, rather than aligning themselves with a specific denomination or church, they adapted and used Christianity to their benefit. In this way, Anagol illustrates how female converts articulated a feminist consciousness through the indigenization of Christianity.

*Globalizing Feminism, 1789-1945* is the successful result of an ambitious project to document women's political history from the French Revolution to the end of World War II. In addition to providing new and revised understandings of feminist history, the volume also encourages the reader to think beyond the text and draw her own conclusions. A timeline of global feminisms appears at the beginning of the compilation, and suggested readings are included for each essay. Specialists and non-specialists alike will be grateful for the chapter summaries which precede each section; indeed, the volume is an accessible point of entry for the study of feminist history. Of course, in a project of this scale, omissions are inevitable. In this case, nearly all of Africa (with the exception of Egypt) is neglected. Furthermore, no attempt is made to define globalism or transnationalism. The absence of these materials, however, serves as an opportunity for other feminist scholars to expand upon the illuminating essays found in *Globalizing Feminisms* and to continue rewriting history.

HistLit 2012-1-131 / Rachel Hynson über Offen, Karen: *Globalizing Feminisms. 1789-1945*.

New York 2009, in: H-Soz-Kult 24.02.2012.