

112 | book review

intelligent compassion: feminist critical methodology in the women's international league for peace and freedom

Catia Cecilia Confortini, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 208pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-984523-1, £41.99 (Hbk).

Since 1979, the readership of *Feminist Review* has relied upon the journal as 'a vehicle to unite research and theory with the political practice, and contribute to the development of both'. Catia Confortini's book *Intelligent Compassion: Feminist Critical Methodology in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom* speaks directly to the core mission of this journal and will be of great interest to those readers who remain committed to *FR*'s mission of critical and sophisticated scholarship. This well-organised and well-researched historical account of a critically engaged and constantly evolving women's activist organisation is both informative and captivating and should be read by all those interested in feminist theorising and feminist advocacy.

By examining the evolution of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest women's peace organisation to date, Confortini's book helps us to make sense of how this organisation endured over time, confronting serious practical and theoretical dilemmas. By focusing on the operation of the organisation from 1945 to 1975, Confortini's research provides a detailed account of the dynamism of feminist advocacy both external and internal to the organisation. In the book's Epilogue, Confortini situates her analysis in the contemporary context of WILPF's work with the United Nations, the four global conferences on women and the current advocacy around the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

The conceptualisation of 'intelligent compassion' as a means to illustrate how feminist theorising has *actually* worked in global politics is the key contribution of the research. Confortini identifies intelligent compassion as the missing methodological tool from Brooke Ackerly's description of Third World Feminist Social Criticism (TWFS). The practice of TWFS involves several mechanisms that enable citizens in deliberative democracies to effectively criticise their democracy when and where inequalities exist and hence effectuate social change. Within this model, social critics are essential facilitators of society's self-examination and provoke the examination of their own methods, roles, qualifications and conclusions (p. 26). Hence, by looking at the role of social critics both inside and outside of WILPF, Confortini demonstrates how Ackerly's TWFS model, which relies upon guiding criteria, deliberative enquiry and sceptical scrutiny, underestimates the potential for emancipatory social change as an outcome of feminist methodology (p. 24). In particular, this rich book illustrates how WILPF used intelligent compassion, together with the three-pronged approach of TWFS, to 'make up a feminist critical methodology' that allowed the organisation 'to challenge its ideological foundations; its embeddedness in liberalism; and notions about gender, race, and class relations inscribed in those foundations (p. 115). This tool 'fosters the enactment of a feminist ethics of care, which is necessary to a full skeptical scrutiny of entrenched ideas, thus enabling an agency that challenges structural constraints' (p. 115). This practice involves 'attentive thinking to ideas that at first we do not understand or whose relation to

the question at hand seems incomprehensible' (p. 117). In this way, Confortini's notion of intelligent compassion contributes to our understanding of the dynamic and complicated layers of feminist advocacy and how activists can learn across diversity and develop solidarity across differences.

Following the introduction and a theoretical chapter on 'Feminist Critical Methodology, Peace, and Social Change', Confortini's book utilises three rich case study chapters on disarmament, decolonisation and the Middle East to explore the global policy arenas that shaped and were shaped by WILPF's neo-liberal, western and orientalist assumptions about the role of states and intergovernmental organisations (and law) in the promotion of peace and women's rights. The case studies, primarily focused on 1945–1975, and which emerge from Confortini's in-depth archival research and thoughtful interview data with the few activists still living who were involved in major decision making for WILPF during those key thirty years, are a fascinating portrayal of WILPF women's interaction with their governments and the United Nations, as well as with each other and with other women who were originally excluded by WILPF's activism. By the late 1970s, WILPF women not only became a 'critical voice within the liberal order' (p. 14) within which they were working, but they also grappled with the theoretical relationship between women, feminism and peace. 'To the feminist IR preoccupation about too easy associations between women and peace they responded with different questions. To what extent is peace a women's issue; that is, do women have a special *interest* in peace? ... WILPF came to the conclusion that peace was of special concern to women' (p. 112). And although WILPF women did not agree on a generalisable women's interest *per se*, their activism does offer a productive means to 'reformulate[s] the relationship between feminism, IR, and peace studies by situating feminist peace theorizing in feminist IR, from which it has largely been excluded' (p. 17).

As WILPF celebrated its hundredth anniversary last year, Confortini's book raises some important questions about the future of the organisation and the possibility of political agency to effect emancipatory social change. The women of WILPF continue to struggle with whether or not to cooperate with global (liberal) organisations, like the United Nations, and to what extent WILPF can effect change from the inside rather than being critical from the outside. Nevertheless, Confortini maintains that 'while it is important to recognize how far the women's movement has come, transformation lies in the ways in which the *process* that brought about this limited change transformed the women's movement itself and WILPF in particular' (p. 134). This process, which includes the 'empathetic cooperative practice' (p. 116) of intelligent compassion, shows an organisation intentionally and intensively evolving into a more international, inclusive and critical collective. Thus, feminists can remain hopeful about the future of WILPF even as it confronts the serious challenges of today, not the least of which include an increasingly militarised and securitised world and an organisational membership that is both waning and dividing along generational lines. Confortini ends the book with a focus on the urgent need for WILPF to attract and retain new members, particularly young women. This sort of engagement requires new forms of communication, reworking of leadership models, more focus on concrete action and less focus on theoretical debates, and, of course, the continued use of intelligent compassion.

Natalie Florea Hudson
University of Dayton

doi:10.1057/fr.2015.63