

Nov-2006

Book Review: Women in the New Millennium: The Global Revolution

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Recommended Citation

Blakely, Kristin (2006). Book Review: Women in the New Millennium: The Global Revolution. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(1), 296-298.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss1/22>

Women in the New Millennium: The Global Revolution. Breneman, Anne R. and Rebecca A. Mbuh. 2006. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books. 336 pp. (Includes bibliography; index; appendix). \$45.00 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Kristin Blakely¹

Women in the New Millennium was inspired by Breneman's and Mbuh's experiences at the UN's Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995 and at the Beijing +5 conference in New York in 2000. The collection is comprised of scholarly work and interview material from a diverse group of women from China, Sweden, Korea, Cameroon, Indonesia, South Africa, Nigeria, and the United States who came together to explore the origins, development, and millennial emergence of a women's movement as a global revolution. Focusing on the experiences of women in specific cultural, historical, and national contexts, *Women in the New Millennium* is not, as Breneman and Mbuh point out, an instructive manual for policy and political change nor is it a comprehensive volume on global women's organizing for gender equality. Rather, it presents select local histories and struggles in the hopes of "invit[ing] women of all backgrounds to the ongoing dialogue and the creation of action plans which will ultimately shape the direction of the new world which is emerging" (xvi).

Each of the book's five parts loosely represents a stage in the life course of a social movement. In Part I, "Beginnings," Breneman offers an introductory overview to thinking about global stimuli for women's organizing. The mythological scope of this chapter is particularly interesting. She references several ancient myths and legendary female figures including Eve, Esther, Cleopatra, Sita and Radha, Harriet Tubman, Sky Woman, the Trung sisters of Vietnam, and Joan of Ark to illustrate how powerful women who defy patriarchal rule and structures are "buried in the human psyche" in cultures and regions around the world. These extraordinary women stand as a reflection of masculine fear of feminine power and demonstrate the possibility of gender role transcendence. As such, they provide hope of change for ordinary women. Breneman also highlights evidence of women's organizing as an outgrowth of struggles for racial equality (such as the abolitionist movement) and within the context of anti-colonialism. Gender injustices become illuminated alongside racial, religious, and class politics. Much like the rest of the book, this introductory chapter is multi-disciplinary with its strongest cues taken from history and sociology. It is highly accessible both in terms of the absence of academic jargon and presupposed specialist knowledge in the subject matter.

Part II, "Women Awakening," contains five global case studies, each detailing women's responses to patriarchy. Ferreira's and Enermalm's autoethnographic chapters are worth noting for their candid, personal recollections of growing up female. Both authors utilize their experiences in reflexive ways, placing their own life histories in critical focus so that the reader can gain insight into very different social worlds. Through Ferreira, we learn of the gendered culture of an immigrant Mexican-American agricultural family and the intersecting boundaries of oppression while coming of age during the Civil Rights movement, while becoming a human rights lawyer, and as a single Latina mother. Through Enermalm, we learn of the early advanced gender politics

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in Sweden and of the egalitarian educational and religious environments in which she prospered as a woman born during the Second World War. While the environments in Enermalm's piece certainly have been and continue to be sites of struggle, a more detailed account of this struggle would have contributed to the critical dimension of such an autoethnographic analysis.

In Part III, Breneman and Mbuh focus on the role of the UN in the global women's movement. Chapter 7 provides a historical overview and outline of the UN's functions and mandate, with clear explanations of CEDAW, UNIFEM, the difference between "international" and "global", and illustrations of 'report cards' and 'indicators'. Absent from the discussion however, is engagement with the political conflicts within the UN, particularly between women from countries of the North and those from the South on defining 'women's issues'. A more nuanced treatment of privilege and power as it operates along class, racial, and ethnic lines between groups of women is needed so as to avoid depictions of a global women's movement as harmonious and conflict-free.

In Part IV, "Hazards of Growing up Female" Moletsane and Delaney provide a gender analysis of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa and Breneman provides a discussion of global gendered violence. Both chapters would work well in the classroom as informative, yet concise, primers on two pressing (and inter-related, as Moletsane and Delaney point out) issues on the global feminist agenda.

The social movement life cycle framework is rounded out with Part V, "Reflections and Prospects". After awakening (consciousness-raising), arising (mobilizing), and growing up (survival and maintenance) – the last handful of chapters explore reconceptualizations of masculinities, motherhood, and gender relations in the new millennium. Of note is Mbuh's chapter on women's struggle for equality in Africa. Based on interviews and surveys with Cameroonian and Nigerian women, the study documents the decline in traditional gender roles in African society, identifies existing barriers to equality (such as early marriage and illiteracy) and maps out strategies for change as articulated by the women in the sample.

Editors and authors, Breneman and Mbuh should be applauded for their embrace of the term 'revolution' and for not shying away from discussing the need for radical, revolutionary social change. Their certainty of and optimism about "the gender revolution that is sweeping the globe (xvi)" is particularly refreshing. This is a book filled with hope. However, while I dislike bringing pessimism to the party, I am troubled by far right and religious fundamentalist movements increasingly occupying the global political terrain (Juergensmeyer, 2000; Norris, 2005) not to mention the rise in terrorism, militarism, and violence all over the world. A discussion of organized regressive, anti-feminist and backlash politics as a competing force to the "gender revolution" would provide more context to the global climate of revolutionary change presented in the book. It is important that the threats to existing achievements of women's equality as well as to future feminist global organizing be addressed in such a volume.

Nonetheless, this is a thoughtful, well-structured and accessible text that students and scholars in women's studies and the social sciences will find useful as an introduction to the study of global women's organizing.

Citations

Juergensmeyer, Mark. (2000) *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Norris, Pippa. (2005) *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Regulated Market*. New York: Cambridge University Press.