

### **Women's movements in international perspective: Latin America and beyond**

Maxine Molyneux; Palgrave, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2001, ix + 244pp, ISBN 0-333-78677-7

At a time when edited texts are dominating academic publishing, it is eminently welcome to see the appearance of a volume in which a single author is able to write with such skill, depth and insight across a broad spectrum of interconnected themes, not to mention such a wide range of historical and geographical contexts. In *Women's Movements in International Perspective*, Maxine Molyneux has not only done this, but in such a way that is likely to reach the hearts and minds of non-specialist and specialist readers alike. It is a book in which a whole series of issues that have been hotly debated not only by feminists, but also by wider communities of scholars, activists, politicians, policy-makers and people in general over several years, are presented in a manner which simultaneously informs, elucidates, and (re-)enlivens. While refreshingly modest about her own role in taking feminist scholarship forward over the last two decades, this book definitively distinguishes Molyneux as one of the leading contemporary thinkers in the field.

The topics tackled by Molyneux under the broad rubric of the political sociology of women's movements and gender-state relations reflect her rich experience in researching feminist issues in a wide variety of places and historical periods. These include anarchist feminism in 19th-century Argentina (Chapter 1), the politics of abortion in Sandinista Nicaragua (Chapter 3), and state, gender and institutional change in Cuba, which traces the evolution of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) from its inception in the immediate aftermath of revolution in 1960, through to the post-Soviet 'Special Period' of the 1990s (Chapter 4). Although only one of the chapters (Chapter 6: 'Analysing Women's Movements') first appeared in its present form as a journal article, many of the others draw and elaborate on earlier papers that have become benchmark readings in Gender Studies courses around the world. Perhaps the most notable one here is Chapter 2 'Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State and Revolution in Nicaragua', which originated in the early 1980s and in which Molyneux introduced her seminal concept of 'practical' and 'strategic' gender interests. The latter has not only become part of the established lexicon of gender and development analyses, but has been incorporated (in various guises) in gender planning and policy-making.

While some of Molyneux's key ideas in *Women's Movements in Latin America* have been revisited, adapted and/or extended by the author herself, or by

others, in the context of evolving theoretical, political and philosophical discussions, what is also striking is the way in which Molyneux remains faithful to the details of time, place and sources that gave birth to her original notions. This comes in part from her dedication to primary fieldwork, whether in archives or with activists, and her commitment to scholarship. Her ability to locate processes so firmly and engagingly in their historical and geographical contexts imbues a clarity to complex conceptual formulations that is often lacking in the contemporary Gender Studies literature.

While the discussions of individual country experiences in Chapters 1–4 indicate how theory can benefit from a solid grounding in case studies, Molyneux constantly reminds us of the broader significance of processes that emerge in different times and places. This approach extends into the second, and more explicitly comparative, part of the book in which Molyneux tackles the relatively understudied questions of women's emancipation under communism and the relationship between state socialism and feminism (Chapter 5), the interactions between states and women's movements (Chapter 6), and issues of gender and citizenship in Latin America (Chapter 7). There is far too much to note within these chapters – incisive discussions of rights, democracy, communitarianism, difference and pluralism, for example – to which the space limitations of a book review can do justice. Suffice it to say, however, that one would be hard-pressed to find so many 'big' questions dealt with so concisely and intelligently as they are here.

*Women's Movements in International Perspective* brings rich historical and geographical texture to gender and feminist theory, and builds a bridge between scholars who might normally remain confined to one element of Gender Studies and, through the general dearth of volumes such as these, miss something of the broader picture. In an age in which there is a great deal of ephemerality in academic writings and rather too much re-inventing of the wheel, this book will almost certainly stand the test of time. *Women's Movements in International Perspective* should be compulsory reading on all Gender Studies courses, not only because it tackles issues crucial to feminist debates in a sophisticated yet accessible manner, but because it is a book that students will be able to enjoy as well as learn from. If Palgrave does not bring out a paperback edition in the near future, it may well find itself in fierce competition with other publishers.

Sylvia Chant