

plebiscite, which proves that traces of modernity could also be found outside of the major centres.

This volume gives the English speaking reader a glimpse into significant developments in prominent places and societies, but it does not offer a deeper insight into less-known areas of the empire. Its multiethnic and contradictory character can be best understood by looking at both centres and peripheries. This approach surely would have even more widened the horizon of this remarkable project, which can be read as a stimulating introduction into the gender history of the late Habsburg Empire.

*Adrian Mitter is a Ph.D. student in the History Department at the University of Toronto. His research focuses on Central and East European history.*

## **REVOLUTIONARY WOMANHOOD: FEMINISM, MODERNITY AND THE STATE IN NASSER'S EGYPT**

Laura Bier  
Stanford: Stanford University Press,  
2011

### **REVIEWED BY GENEVIEVE RITCHIE**

“The woman question” in its various articulations and cultural expressions has historically been bound up with notions of national identity and nationalism. Through developing and unpacking the concept of state feminism Laura Bier grappled with the complex and contradictory discourses that shaped hegemonic notions of womanhood in the Nasser era. Drawing upon policy studies, political speeches, women’s press,

film, and literature the study was grounded in a cultural history, and fleshed out the connections between the construction of national womanhood and the conceptual framing of revolution. In short, the primary focus of the study was the relation between the construction of feminine identity and the modern nation-state.

State feminism is the central point of analysis, which was then explored through a descriptive problematizing of four themes: the ideological framing of working women, secularism and law, family planning and reproduction, and international feminism. As a category for inquiry state feminism was located in the Nasser regime’s modernizing project, but had its historical roots in the earlier period of colonial control. As such, state feminism was framed by the interlocking discourses of modernity, inclusion, and political participation, which were then set against traditional modes of social organization. State feminism, then, must be understood as a constellation of practices and ideologies that aimed to transform women into modern political subjects. Thus, for Bier state feminism was at its core a didactic project.

Noting that the Nasser regime did not significantly transform the number of women in the workforce, Bier put forth the argument that the discursively constructed figure of the working woman played an important role in the articulation of the public sphere as modern and secular. The reconfiguring of the public sphere also shaped images of the home around a bourgeois model of domesticity. As such, the image of working women as a sign of modernity did little to destabilize the patriarchal organization of domestic labour. In fact, Bier gave extensive examples of state policies and incentives that were designed to create the conditions for women to access the tools of modern

living, thereby creating a prescriptive model of femininity that drew upon imagery of both domesticity and professionalism.

Policies that dealt specifically with the family drew multiple conflicting perspectives into the public debate, which then had adverse outcomes for women generally and working class women in particular. Through her discussion of the personal status laws, Bier delineated the manner in which contrasting perspectives (the Nasser regime and religious tradition) coalesced and ultimately undermined the work of feminist reformers. In this respect, her analysis provided a clear and detailed description of the processes by which patriarchal power was reproduced and newly created during periods of national re-definition. Similarly, her analysis of family planning highlighted the manner in which women’s reproductive capacities have put our bodies at the centre of the national and international discursive. Here again her analysis emphasized the complex and contradictory consequences of state initiated family planning programs, which increased women’s access to contraception, while concomitantly denigrating their traditional knowledge.

The final point explored by Bier was the relationship between Egyptian subjectivity and women’s liberation trans-nationally. She put forth the argument that middle class and elite Egyptian women articulated their own womanhood and liberation through the imagery of post-colonial progress. Her analysis here was framed by fluid models of identity and subjectivity, which fragment social context by emphasizing the disciplinary power of de-historicized universalist discourses. Conversely, framing her analysis in terms of consciousness and feminist consciousness-raising could have opened the conceptual space to engage more complexly with

the history, and potentials of women's trans-national solidarity.

As a history of Egyptian women and feminisms the strength of this analysis lies with the rich detail that Bier gave to the ideological supports of patriarchal domination. Bier, therefore, cogently described some of the processes by which patriarchy becomes embedded in practices of governing, which then normalized the control and regulation of women's bodies and labour. By expanding her analysis into both the earlier period of colonial control as well as the current period of neoliberal capitalism, her analysis emphasized the social unfolding of women's subordination to the nation-state as well as the implications of this history for current feminist struggles. In other words, the policies and discourses that were specific to the Nasser era were problematized in a manner that allows feminist research to grapple more generally with the protracted history of women's subordination across historical moments and cultural contexts.

*Genevieve Ritchie is a community organizer who works with environmental and migrant justice movements. She writes about anti-racist feminism and critical praxis.*

## UNIONS, EQUITY AND THE PATH TO RENEWAL

Janice R. Foley and Patricia L. Baker, Editors.

Vancouver, UBC Press 2009

REVIEWED BY HANS

ROLLMAN

It is open season on unions not just in the political arena, but in the ivory tower as well. The 'crisis' facing organized labour—an ongoing

loss of membership, density, legal protection, and political influence—has been experienced differently in different jurisdictions around the world, but just as it has set unions on an increasingly urgent course to respond and adapt to the challenges they face, it has also fomented a great deal of intellectual inquiry as academics and researchers assess and analyze unions' responses, and what these efforts can help us to understand about the present and future state of the labour movement, and about workers' experience more broadly.

Thus the growth of a burgeoning body of literature under the moniker of 'union renewal' or 'organized-labour-in-crisis'. There are, of course, no easy answers to the question of how unions can most effectively renew themselves (nor even to the question of what purpose they should be renewing themselves for) but feminist researchers in the field—of which, thankfully, there are no small number—have flagged one important question: what is the role of equity in rebuilding and revitalizing the labour movement? Indeed, this reviewer would suggest the union crisis/renewal literature typically addresses equity in one of two ways: either as a distraction from (what some consider) more primary goals such as an intensified (albeit romanticized and under-theorized) return to street militancy and class analysis; or, by contrast, as fundamental to reversing the decline of organized labour and correcting the failures of white masculinist labour 'organizing' of the past sixty years.

Foley and Baker's collection *Unions, Equity and the Path to Renewal* falls firmly into the latter camp. Their focus is primarily Canadian (rightly so: while union activists have been keen to exchange strategies internationally, the fact is that Canada has not encountered the same sort of 'crisis' or 'decline'

experienced elsewhere in the world, much of which can be attributed to the significance of regional policy (and cultural differences), and covers a broad swath of research and activism taking place under the equity banner within organized labour. The twelve papers comprising the collection provide both broad overviews of equity gains and histories within the Canadian labour movement, as well as more focused critiques on particular dimensions of identity and equity and the shortcomings of organized labour in Canada on these fronts. The editors do not fall into the trap of focusing solely on women's equity struggles: the section "Black Trade Unionists Speak Out" comprises no less than a quarter of the book, while fascinating and critically important conceptual models are theorized in Linda Briskin's contribution on cross-constituency organizing and Janice Foley's effort to theorize a conceptual model for equity, drawing in part on social movement theory. The final section even offers international and comparative perspectives on the themes explored in the book, drawing from Australian, American, and British examples. Anne McBride and Jeremy Waddington's contribution on the importance of addressing women's and equity group representation in union merger processes is particularly salient given the ongoing merger between the CEP and the CAW in Canada.

The contributions in this collection ought to be required reading not just for researchers but for union organizers, leaders, and activists as well. Jan Kainer's masterful overview of the contribution of women's equity activism to union growth and renewal, and Anne Forrest's assessment of the historical and ongoing relevance of economic equality (organized labour's traditional forte) to broader equity issues cast an important foundation for several of the key