

In a complex world, we cannot focus exclusively on one political tradition as a feminist ‘home territory’; the future of feminisms is a much larger topic

*Lucy Delap reviews Sylvia Walby's book covering recent feminist thinking and controversy. **The Future of Feminism** provides clarity on some key debates, but our reviewer is left disappointed by the lack a deep engagement with the history of feminism.*

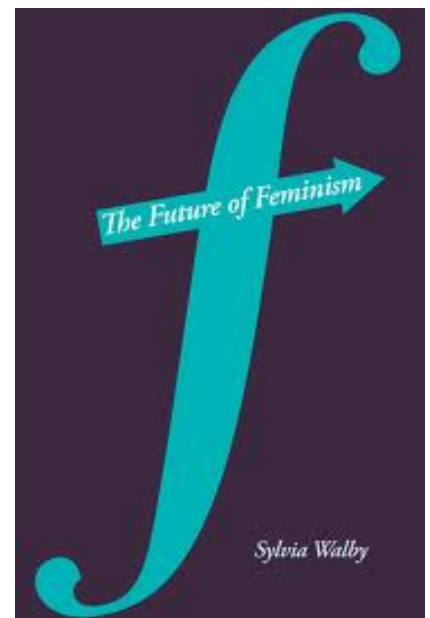


The Future of Feminism. Sylvia Walby. Polity Press. July 2011.

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[Sylvia Walby](#) has long been a major figure in theorising feminism through a materialist perspective, most famously in her influential *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990). In her 2011 book, Walby offers a broad overview of how gender inequality has been addressed and women's interests articulated over the past four decades. She takes an inclusive definition of feminism which is usefully able to encompass both projects explicitly named as feminist, and those which advance women's interests but do not claim an explicitly feminist affiliation. Walby is sensitive to the different perspectives and goals that emerge in the 'global North' and 'global South', and is concerned to supplement her overarching analysis with attention to specificities of place and time.

Her scope is impressive, and this book provides an enormously useful summary of recent feminist thinking and controversy. Feminist engagement with the state, the mainstreaming of feminist perspectives in policy making, the rise of anti-essentialism and the resulting loss of focus on power, the dilemmas over politics of redistribution or recognition, the changing context under the rise of neoliberalism, 'post-feminism' – these are all discussed and recent contributions referenced. Indeed, around a quarter of the book consists of references. Many are to websites rather than to printed texts, and while this makes the references extremely contemporary, it may result in the book also going out of date swiftly as this more ephemeral world of internet publishing and blogging moves on.



Writing this kind of general survey asks one to cut corners and must inevitably leave major debates simply referenced rather than explored. The scope of the book sometimes left Walby using short-hand for entities which to my eyes were crying out for clarification or unpacking. She refers to 'the public gender regime' on a number of occasions, but I was left with little sense of what this might mean. Similarly, 'the state' seemed to gain a high level of attention, but there was little discussion of how a critical feminist analysis must break down this monolith into its components, and supplement it by attending to other institutions of power (the unions, the media, universities etc.)

From my own disciplinary perspective, history, *The Future of Feminism* seemed to lack a deep engagement with the history of feminism. Important historical debates about whether there was a first or second wave of feminism activism are ignored, and these terms are used uncritically. As Nancy

Hewitt's 2009 collection *No Permanent Waves* demonstrated, the interstices and 'troughs' of the imagined 'waves' of feminist mobilisation are rarely dead spaces; moreover, the 'waves' metaphor may limit our feminist imagination. Karen Offen prefers to think transnationally through a metaphor of volcanic lava (*European Feminisms*, 2000), while Hewitt herself recasts the debate in terms of radio waves, with moments of tuning in, multiple competing voices, static and interference. This rich, provocative, ongoing set of debates does not emerge in Walby's dryly written text. *The Future of Feminism* provides clarity, but with little narrative style or flair. The chapters follow a formula of summarising the points to be covered, covering them, and summing up; there are lists, and choppy thoughts which one wishes a writer of Walby's calibre had allowed herself to pursue.

Walby's final chapter finally turns to what the book as a whole had promised – an analysis of 'where next?' for feminism. She poses certain threats and challenges to feminism, particularly the rise of neo-liberalism and the de-democratisation of the global North. But a more optimistic vision rests on the rise of women in paid employment, whose votes, Walby predicts, will constitute a new impetus towards social democracy. She is thus fairly even-handed in her perception of both dangers and opportunities facing feminists.

Walby's focus on social democracy as a seedbed of feminism is assumed rather than demonstrated; a more historicised account would acknowledge the multiple alliances that feminists have made with many other forms of political and religious formations. The identification of multiple feminisms is implied, but not fully integrated in this analysis. There seems a slippage between the ambition to survey feminism(s) in the whole, and the pinning of the only viable future for feminism as a synthesis between feminism and social democracy. Walby's vision of the European Union as a potential 'leading global hegemon' (p. 159) seems unconvincing and parochial. Social democracy may indeed promise many benefits for women, but the recent conflicts within France over *l'affaire du voile* reminds us of its limits. In a complex multilateral world, we cannot focus exclusively on one political tradition as a feminist 'home territory'; the future of feminisms is a much larger topic.

Lucy Delap is a fellow of St Catharine's College, Cambridge, and a member of the History Faculty, University of Cambridge. Her book *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters, of the early twentieth century* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) won the 2008 Women's History Network Prize. *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth Century Britain*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2011. She is currently working on masculinities, gender activism, and religion in twentieth century Britain. [Read more reviews by Lucy.](#)

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