


BOOK REVIEW

***Feminist Institutionalism in South Africa: Designing for Gender Equality.* Edited by Amanda Gouws. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022. 312 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN: 9781538160084; also available as e-book.**

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The National Gender Machinery (NGM), created as part of South Africa's transition from the racist apartheid regime after a long liberation struggle, was designed following an extensive process of debate and consultation among feminist activists and scholars. The result of much reflection on the experience of other countries both within Africa and farther afield, these new institutions were conceived as a package of three bodies within the new legislature (in the form of the Joint Standing Committee on the Improvement of the Quality of Life and Status of Women) and the state bureaucracy (Office of the Status of Women), alongside an independent Commission for Gender Equality (CGE). Together, they were designed to overcome some of the problems that had beset other efforts elsewhere. However, after an auspicious and hope-filled start, disillusionment grew as the institutions failed to deliver.

As the editor, Amanda Gouws, recounts, *Feminist Institutionalism in South Africa* emerged from a project that attempted to better understand the experiences of feminist activists/feminist scholars in the South African NGM. It does so through a detailed examination of the 25-year life span of one body, the CGE, outlining “how the original intent, hopes and aspirations of feminist design can become undermined over time through patronage politics, co-optation of women in the state, nationalism and the shrinking spaces in which women's organizations can engage the state” (2). As such, this book provides important insights and lessons, not just for those interested in the South African experience but for all feminists seeking to better understand national gender machineries, their successes, as well as the problems and pitfalls they encounter.

A key aspect of this collection that makes it so valuable is that the authors are either former commissioners of the CGE and/or South African feminist activists and scholars with a deep knowledge of the processes that the volume focuses on, gained through working closely with the structures of the NGM. In total, 5 of the 11 chapter authors were commissioners, including the editor, Amanda Gouws

(2012–14), as well as Cathi Albertyn (1997–2000), Gertrude Fester (2001–2006), Janine Hicks (2007–16) and Sheila Meintjes (2001–04). However, their chapters are not simply reflections on their personal experience but rigorous analyses that incorporate important insider knowledge. Many of the chapter authors also have direct experience of the liberation struggle and the negotiation processes that accompanied the transition, playing a key part in the Women’s National Coalition. This broad-based women’s alliance had a central role in ensuring that gender equality concerns, including the creation of the NGM, were incorporated into the new South African constitution and polity.

Gouws’s introduction provides the theoretical framing and context for the collection as a whole. She outlines debates on the state, state feminism, feminist institutionalism (FI), as well as institutional design, emphasizing the particularities of South Africa as a postcolonial state, as well as the need to engage with the complexities of the Global South, rather than simply transposing theories and approaches developed in the Global North wholesale. An FI approach that is alert to these concerns (and influenced by both historical and discursive institutionalism) helps situate the volume’s analysis firmly within an institutionalist framing, highlighting the importance of the transition as a critical juncture, of institutional design, as well as the interaction between actors, including civil society actors and state institutions.

The main body of the collection is divided into four sections roughly mirroring the CGE’s history and trajectory. The four chapters in Part I outline the CGE’s history and changing fortunes. Shireen Hassim places it in its wider historical and institutional context, and then Sheila Meintjes, Amanda Gouws, and Lisa Vetten begin to detail how the CGE became captured by the state and the African National Congress (ANC) as the ruling party, and they outline some of the dilemmas and contradictions for civil society and feminist movements of engaging with the state. The two chapters (by Cathi Albertyn and Janine Hicks) in the (relatively short) second section detail the CGE’s successes, most notably in the courts and the judicial system, for example around customary law, and in leveraging state accountability around international and constitutional gender equality commitments, particularly for maternity protection benefits for informal workers.

Each of the four chapters in the third and much longer section, “The Feminist Losing Battle in the State,” analyzes in more detail one aspect of the challenges faced by feminists. Gertrude Fester outlines the difficulties she faced as a feminist within the state; Philile Ntuli traces the process by which the ANC supplanted the NGM structures created during the transition with a Ministry for Women and its subsequent failures; Joy Watson examines the failure to properly implement South Africa’s gender-responsive budgeting, once heralded all over the world; and Ubanesia Adams-Jack analyzes the limitations of the NGM through an examination of its policy-related documents. The final chapter returns the focus to feminist movements and their actions around gender-based violence in the One in Nine campaign, which again highlights the failure of the state and the ANC to address high levels of rape and sexual violence.

The chapters in this volume reinforce the necessity for feminists to engage with the state if meaningful change is to be achieved, and they forcefully

underline that, even with a sophisticated understanding of how institutions like states operate and the use of important lessons learned from other cases to improve the design of new feminist institutions, this alone is not enough. As we have seen in other contexts, such as when right-wing governments gain power, these gains are fragile. The South African case shows how, if the state is captured by corrupt or kleptocratic actors, feminist actors rarely have the power on their own or in alliance with civil society actors to protect gains, even if those gains are seemingly firmly enshrined within new institutional structures, from erosion and decay. Therefore, although this volume focuses on one institution in one country, because the South African case is such an important one, given the role that feminist actors could play in the design of new institutions at such a pivotal moment, and because the volume engages with significant but unresolved questions about the nature and role of the state, as well as the potential costs and benefits for feminists of engaging with the state, this collection makes a very valuable contribution to these ongoing, but perhaps now relatively neglected, debates within feminist scholarship that deserve to be revisited.

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