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Conference Report: Latin American Feminism : Challenges for Global Justice Movements (May 2nd 2011, Helsinki)

Härkönen, Heidi

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EEVA BERGLUND,
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE LONDON
eeva@eeva.co.uk

SEMINAR REPORT

LATIN AMERICAN FEMINISM: CHALLENGES FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS, MAY 2ND 2011, HELSINKI

The seminar was dedicated to examining the types of transformations that have recently taken place in feminism in Latin America and in the global justice movements, as well as envisioning possible future processes and shifts in relation to globalization. The seminar was organized jointly by the Centre of Excellence in Global Governance Research, the Genie Research Project on Paradoxes of Finnish Gender Power, the Latin American Studies section from the Department of World Cultures, and the Program on Democracy and Global Transformations at the Department of Political and Economic Studies at the University of Helsinki, to honor the visit to Finland of Virginia Vargas, a prominent Latin American feminist.

As host, Teuvo Teivainen offered a short introduction before Virginia Vargas opened the discussion with a talk on globalization, democracy and feminism in Latin America and elsewhere. She discussed how the process of globalization produces fragmentation in Latin America, giving rise to new processes, new actors and new plural subjectivities

such as the Afro-Latina-movement and the transsexual movement. In Vargas' opinion this creates new epistemological possibilities and new ways to resist hegemonic globalization. Vargas' talk was followed by a presentation from Peter Waterman on internationalism and global justice, after which Johanna Kantola and Elina Vuola represented brief comments and questions to both discussants. In her comment, Kantola examined the concept of gender mainstreaming and urged the discussants to reflect on the types of dangers that exist in taking feminist concepts to a transnational level since this shift eliminates, for instance, the notion of social class. Elina Vuola pondered on the narrowing political climate in Finland and its impact on feminism, as well as, like Kantola, stressing the importance of the precise definition of concepts: what do we mean when we speak about feminism, for example? After this the discussion was opened to the audience and the debate examined the relationship between radical social activism and state institutions, raising the issue of the role of feminism in a country such as Finland with its female president. Kantola suggested that there is a need for research on women in the right-wing parties since these have recently taken prominent political positions in Finland as well as elsewhere in Europe.

However, from an anthropological point of view, the discussion provided little substance to the discussion on globalization. The concept of global justice was left undefined and what was in fact meant by 'global justice movements' remained rather unclear. Talking about 'feminisms', 'new epistemological perspectives', 'new subjectivities', 'confronting hegemonic globalization' and so on, remained for the most part rather vague since such large-scale transformations were not connected to actual historical and cultural processes in Latin America or elsewhere. For instance, from an anthropological point of view the question of how to argue for the relevance of feminist concerns in a country with women in prominent ceremonial positions represents less of a problem, since most of anthropologists are used to dealing with the discrepancies between official (state) discourses and peoples' practical lives in their research. Moreover, even though the panelists agreed on the importance of making precise definitions on concepts, such precision was largely lacking in the seminar.

The topic of the discussion was highly interesting. Yet personally I would have wanted to hear more about the actual state of feminism in Latin America with more in-depth accounts on the types of actors as well as claims made by Latin American feminists. Moreover, it would have been interesting to hear some case studies on how ordinary women and men from different parts of Latin America relate to feminist claims. I was left wishing for more information on the grassroots dimensions of such large-scale concepts as 'plural subjects', 'fragmentation' and 'hegemony'. For instance, it would have been fascinating to hear more about the Afro-Latin feminist movement or the transsexual movement in Latin America that Vargas brought up in her talk.

HEIDI HÄRKÖNEN
 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
 DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL RESEARCH
 UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
 heidi.harkonen@helsinki.fi