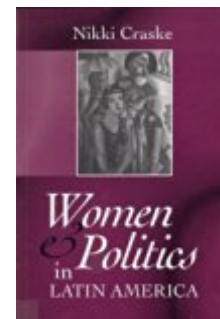


Nikki Craske. *Women and Politics in Latin America*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999. xiii + 242 pp. \$20.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8135-2693-5.



Reviewed by Margaret Power

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Few books exist that offer an overview of women in modern Latin America. *Women and Politics in Latin America* does an outstanding job at filling in this gap. It provides both graduate and undergraduate students with a stimulating and well-researched introduction to key issues that have confronted women in Latin America in recent decades.

One of Craske's central concerns is the impact that Latin American women's primary identity as mothers has on their participation in politics and claims to citizenship. Her focus on this critical issue makes this book both coherent and thought-provoking, qualities that are frequently lacking in many surveys.

Since motherhood is so central to Latin American women and this book, Craske begins her study with a discussion of how three scholars, Temma Kaplan, Sonia Alvarez, and Maxine Molyneux, have conceptualized the relationship between it and politics. She acknowledges that Kaplan's work on female consciousness "shows how potent motherhood can be as a political identity," but believes that it is "too steeped in essentialism."

I found her criticisms of Kaplan's use of female consciousness somewhat misleading since she inaccurately implies that Kaplan's examination of female consciousness "focus[es] on the emotive language of life preservation" and concludes that it would be more useful if viewed "as something learned through identification with certain gender constructions that centre upon nurturing" (pp. 16-17). According to my reading, Kaplan does not focus on the former and argues for the latter. Her examination of the specific actions and thinking of working-class women in Barcelona allows her to conclude that these women's identity as mothers motivated them to act in ways that were atypical for them but did not challenge their accustomed gender roles.

By way of contrast, Craske believes that Alvarez's description of militant motherhood, which is based on the latter's study of women and social movements during the military dictatorship in Brazil, "is a more useful conceptual tool for Latin America" because it allows scholars to "see the process of politicization in a more dynamic way than is implied in female consciousness." This

model, Craske believes, is important because it allows scholars to see "political participation as constantly evolving and to acknowledge that some women move beyond narrow identification with the family" (pp. 17-18).

Molyneux's development of the terms "strategic gender interests" and "practical gender interests," derived from her study of women in Nicaragua during the Sandinista government, has influenced many scholars of women in Latin America. Briefly, strategic gender interests refer to demands more commonly associated with feminism, such as reproductive rights or legal equality. Practical gender interests relate to women's petitions for concrete changes that will improve their daily lives, such as access to clean water. Craske points out that although these two types of demands do exist, seeing them as "poles of a continuum" rather than "in opposition to one another" is a more realistic and helpful way to understand women's struggles (pp. 18-19). She makes the interesting observation that it may be easier for governments to respond to women's strategic gender interests since practical gender interests typically "require material resources which are not always forthcoming" (20). However, it is important to note that strategic gender interests, such as full legal equality, also demand the expenditure of resources, as well as challenge the gendered structure of Latin American societies.

Craske convincingly argues that women's identities as mothers initially propelled many into action, particularly in the human rights and consumer movements. However, she cautions, in order to be citizens women cannot limit their political identity or activity to maternalism because this limits their ability to negotiate, "which is an intrinsic part of the political process" (pp. 3-4). In addition, the linking of motherhood and politics leads women to embrace an "apolitical identity which removes them from long-term participation in the institutional political arena" (p. 6).

The book is useful for those who are familiar with Latin America as well as for those who are not. To ensure its accessibility to a diverse audience, Chapter Three provides helpful background information, includes an explanation of terms such as populism and clientelism which are critical to understanding Latin American politics, and surveys the region's recent history. This chapter successfully places women's realities and struggles in the broader context of Latin America but also keeps the focus on the particularities of women's lives and issues. For example, Craske describes how structural adjustment policies (SAPs) have affected Latin Americans. She then discusses how the decline in state services that result from the SAPs have increased the demands placed on women to ensure their families' survival and, consequently, have led to a diminution in women's ability to be politically active (pp. 33-34).

Each of the following five chapters examines a critical aspect of women and society. The chapters discuss women's relationship to politics, work, social movements, empowerment in revolutionary situations, and feminism. These chapters work very well since they develop the key debates that each topic involves, offer helpful information on them, and present illustrative case studies of each issue. For example, the chapter on revolutionary empowerment looks at women's lives and struggles in contemporary Cuba and Nicaragua during the Sandinista government.

Although the book contains some information on women's lives from the 1940s on, it primarily focuses on the last three decades. For much of the region, military dictatorships, resistance to military rule, and the transition from dictatorial regimes to democratic governments have defined the last thirty years. Craske examines how these diverging governments have affected women's political identities and involvement. She points out that, ironically, many women were more politically active during the dictatorships than they are today in the post-dictatorship period. This re-

flects, in part, the imposition of neoliberal economies, the heightened demands these policies have placed on women, and the decline in social movements which had provided so many women with an entre into politics.

Inevitably, no book can cover all the nations in a region as vast as Latin America or discuss all the issues that confront women in it. However, it is important to point out that the Caribbean (except for Cuba) is notably absent from the book, as are many of the Andean nations. Although Puerto Rico is a U.S. colony, it is still a Latin American nation and should be included in any survey of the region. In addition and perhaps related to the lack of attention paid to these areas, there is very little discussion of race, white supremacy, and women of color. Practically no mention is made of women of African descent or of indigenous women. Their lives and struggles compose a critical aspect of Latin American women's realities and should be integrated into any survey of Latin American women. I would also have appreciated more discussion of women and sexuality. Women's empowerment, a key issue in this book, certainly includes women's control of their bodies and the ability to choose and define their own sexuality. Lesbianism is mentioned only in the context of the list of participants in the Regional Feminist Meetings and reproductive rights are only referred to when Craske discusses specific Cuban and Nicaraguan government policies towards women.

Despite these concerns, this is an excellent book and I highly recommend it. The book excels at developing an engaging portrait of the diverse struggles that Latin American women have undertaken in the recent period. It presents a balanced vision of the progress that they have made and the substantial obstacles they need to overcome to achieve full citizenship and political, economic, and social equality. *Women and Politics in Latin America* is successful because it is accessible and provocative, informative and interesting.

It contains a wealth of empirical data and highly informed theoretical discussions of the central issues confronting women in Latin America. The inclusion of quotes from Latin American women and material from significant case studies enliven the book and clearly illustrate the theoretical debates that Craske discusses. This book could be used in a class on modern Latin American politics, women in Latin America, or global history.

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