Historian Patricia Harms traces the maternal feminist politics of mainly middle-class ladina women in Guatemala City during three major periods: the rise of liberalism beginning in 1871, a period of moderate reform following the 1920 revolution, and the October Revolution of 1944, which lasted until the US-backed coup in 1954. While the interests of upper-class women dominated earlier ladina movements, the later periods gave rise to a socialist feminism that centered the needs of working-class women and their children. Harms resists the historical erasure of ladina feminist politics and, perhaps most importantly, demonstrates the significant role of ladinas within the October Revolution.

Harms traces how in the late 1880s, two sisters, Vicenta Laparra de la Cerda and Jesús Laparra, established literary circles to claim legal rights as their own. Originally of humble rural origins, they founded two short-lived magazines, *La Voz de la Mujer* and *El Ideal*, whose readership drew from labor unions, Catholic reform societies, and a small yet growing number of teachers. The sisters strongly critiqued liberal politicians who identified motherhood as foundational to society yet simultaneously denied women legal and civic rights. Laparra de la Cerda identified mothers and women “as the moral gauge for Guatemalan politics” and urged politicians not to ignore poor and disabled people with their reforms (p. 34). The state eventually banned *La Voz de la Mujer* in 1885. As Harms argues, the journals “created the first published discourse over the rights of women and the state in the capital city” (p. 39). The Laparra sisters also founded schools for middle-class girls, which, according to Harms, created an “ideological and literary legacy for another generation of women who resurfaced during the 1920s” (p. 43).

Harms then illuminates the political stakes of suffragist politics. In 1925, a small group of writers from the coffee elite formed the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral (SGM), which lasted until 1926. In contrast to labor unions that demanded universal suffrage, SGM did not even support suffrage for literate women, seeing women as politically unprepared to assume such a role. In a country in which 87 percent of people could not read or write, SGM campaigned to open a library and the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala to upper-class women. In contrast to the Laparra sisters, SGM founder Rosa Rodríguez López openly expressed disdain toward domestic workers, claiming that elite mothers abandoned their children to the “stupid servant for a life of frivolity or laziness” (p. 54). These racist and classist views echoed other bourgeois feminist groups, like the Unión Cívica Guatemalteca, which in the 1940s, rejected universal suf-
frage and argued that literate white and ladina women deserved to vote more than illiterate indigenous men. Harms reveals how these politics undermined possibilities for interethnic and class solidarity, resulting in suffrage only for literate women in 1945, which meant the exclusion of nearly all indigenous women and roughly 70 percent of ladinas from the vote. The Catholic Church then recruited elite women to strengthen anti-revolutionary movements in the capital city.

The class politics of bourgeois ladina feminists are unsurprising given their power over working-class ladinas and indigenous women, but here the analysis could have gone further. The book does not interrogate the structural relationship of ladinas to whiteness, leaving the reader to wonder if Guatemalan society treated these upper-class ladinas as white and how these women racially identified. Based on the photos presented in the book, some of these women appear physically indistinguishable from white European women. Harms also argues that early movements did in fact have a consciousness about the subordinate position of women, which fulfills her definition of feminism. But she uses the term “proto-feminist” to describe those movements, which undermines her main argument. The term is also limiting since it suggests a linear development of feminism. It assumes that bourgeois feminists had undeveloped class politics, when it may be more helpful to emphasize how class interests informed their feminism. In other words, bourgeois feminism was fully developed to advance the interests of upper-class women.

From SGM emerged Luz Valle and Gloria Menéndez Mina, who launched two journals, Nosotras and Azul, during the Jorge Ubico dictatorship (1931-44). While Azul was more conservative, the major contribution of Nosotras rested in its ability to reach nearly half of Guatemala’s teachers, the majority of whom were women. The magazine denounced Ubico’s defunding and militarization of the public-school system and the dire conditions that prevented indigenous children from accessing education. Harms details how it “maintained a feminist consciousness among a critical cadre of readers” who emerged as a strong political opposition to Ubico’s dictatorship (p. 104).

The book’s most fascinating chapters document how, beginning in the 1940s, socialist feminism became a critical force in ladina movements. The 1947 Inter-American Congress of Women, held in Guatemala City, produced a split between anti-communist women and progressive and socialist women. Women from the latter camp founded the Alianza Femenina Guatemalteca in October 1947, drawing women from all the revolutionary parties and firmly declaring themselves not to be an “organization of bourgeois women who crocheted things” (p. 223). The Alianza critiqued the mono-agricultural economy and foreign monopoly on transportation and land as being key forces that created misery for working-class women and their children. Harms traces how working-class labor organizers like Ester de Urrutia strongly believed that the participation of rural and indigenous women was necessary to deepen the revolutionary process to confront structural inequalities. The Alianza organized thousands of working-class women into committees, demanding suffrage for illiterate Guatemalans, labor protections for domestic workers and pieceworkers, equal wages between women and men, and women’s right to land ownership under the 1952 Agrarian reform. Its membership was mainly rooted in agricultural areas dominated by the United Fruit Company. First lady María Vilanova de Árbenz also played a key role in the Alianza. In addition to pushing president Jacobo Árbenz to read radical literature, she supported the unionization of childcare workers in state-run daycare centers and helped expand medical, social, and recreational services to working-class women. As a coup became imminent, the Alianza called on women to form armed brigades to defend the revolution, while bourgeois feminists joined the literary circles of fascist women. Ester de Urrutia’s position as secretary gen-
eral of the Alianza made her an enemy of the state. Together with her husband, she found refuge in the Argentine embassy where she met a young medical student with an asthma condition, Ernesto Guevara. His experience in Guatemala would be formative for his thinking on the necessity of anti-imperialist armed struggle.

Harms demonstrates how Cold War-era frameworks do not allow us to understand women’s organizations on their own terms. Although the Alianza was the largest women’s organization during the period, some scholars have dismissed it as a “communist front” or a recruitment wing for male-led revolutionary parties. These false characterizations present women as mindless, politically inexperienced followers who had little to say about sexism within their own movements, when in fact groups like the Alianza advanced radical positions on gender relations. Harms also challenges the North Atlantic “wave” model used to periodize feminist history, demonstrating the richness of feminist politics during the 1940s and 1950s—decades normally considered to be lulls in feminist organizing. Furthermore, the book offers an important political lesson: the price that revolutionary movements have paid when leftist men have excluded working-class women from their leadership and base. Those men not only undermined the growth of their revolutionary movements but also enabled fascist opponents to mobilize working-class women in support of anti-revolutionary campaigns. In short, an analysis of gender is key for understanding the internal factors that enabled the revolution’s demise in Guatemala.

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