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Russo Giusi: *Women, Empires, and Body Politics at the United Nations, 1946–1975*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023, 306 pp.

Reviewed by
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With her book, Giusi Russo offers a critical history of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), in which she recounts how women's rights were forged and defined at the United Nations (UN). In recent years, the literature on international organizations has experienced a significant shift by moving away from the realist realm and increasingly taking up a greater interest in international actors such as international organizations' delegates, international civil servants, international lobbies, and international associations. In this context, the history of women presence and actions in international arenas has also experienced a renewal. The growing literature on international women's associations has shown that women were active in the international sphere well before their formal integration to the work of international organizations.¹ Meanwhile, the collective book edited by Glenda Sluga and Caroline James on women, diplomacy, and international relations, among others, confirms that women were

involved formally and informally in the international relations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.² Russo's book situates itself within this historiographical shift. As the author says herself, the book is "a counternarrative of a single story" (p. 199). Although it aligns with the traditional historiography that depicts a CSW dominated by the liberal perception of feminism, *Women, Empires, and Body Politics at the United Nations* expands our understanding of the CSW by demonstrating the presence of imperial feminism alongside liberal values.

Women, Empires, and Body Politics seeks to reintroduce the role of women in the UN system through a study of the CSW from below. This focus aligns with a small but valuable literature on women's delegates and commissioners at the UN, which has brought light to the multiple roles of these actors.³ Russo also draws from the literature on colonization, decolonization, and empires to set up her narrative. Using body politics as a vehicle, Russo adds a layer to the history of the CSW. She effectively dismantles the myth of the uninterrupted progress often attached to the status of women. In Russo's thesis, the woman's body becomes a terrain for ideological and political confrontations. She argues that in the context of the CSW, the woman's body is set up as a tool at the service of the UN's politics.

The volume is a balanced study in which commissioners from the West, the East, and the South are taking centre stage equally and are not limited to their representative states. Russo's decision not to use one of the most widely exploited primary sources by historians of the CSW, records of the US commissioners', reinforces this perspective and helps to draw new roads for future research on the topic that move away from the Western centric approach. The book rightly demonstrates that the CSW considered that there were two categories of women, the rescuers and the rescued. Russo thereby does not limit her thesis to bringing life to the corridors of the UN. By adding the perspective of the receivers of the CSW frameworks, this book directly questions the effects of the UN agenda on the status of women. Altogether, Russo thus effectively explores the CSW agenda from the perspective of the Global South. Noticeably, Russo selected a set of pictures used to adorn each of the book chapters. The pictures begin and end with women of colour and depict both the receivers and the commissioners. Russo describes them in detail, taking into consideration both the internal and external details of their stories. These pictures not only illustrate her analysis but also provide the reader with context by showing the self-portrayals of the CSW and of its actors.

The book is organized more or less chronologically, covering the history of the CSW from its establishment until 1975. The first part of the book, until the end of chapter 3, depicts the history of the CSW and its comprehension of the status of women. In chapter 1, Russo simultaneously engages and re-evaluates the "women of the whole world". Here, Russo confirms that women's

delegates of the conference enforced the concept of body difference. The book's second chapter recounts the early relationship between the CSW, its commissioners, and the world outside the West. It relates how the CSW attempted to transform women into citizens and how, in this context, the CSW isolated the category of "women in dependent territories" by adopting an Orientalist perspective. Women in colonized areas were deemed the "others", isolated by their presumed backwardness. Chapter 3 dives into the Cold War atmosphere in the CSW through the development lens, a growing element of the UN agenda. Russo illustrates how in this period, between 1955 and 1965, the two Cold War powers dominated the debate at the CSW and how the status of women increasingly became a contentious topic of the ideological battle between the West and the East.

The second part of Russo's book is more analytical, focusing on the imperial feminist aspects of the CSW, with an emphasis on body politics. Chapter 4 is perhaps one of the stronger chapters. It is dedicated to the relationships between the Trusteeship Council and the CSW, two institutions that have previously never been considered together. With this perspective, Russo introduces us to the concept of bodily pain, defined as a synonym of colonial violence. Chapter 5 advances this perspective by diving into the dichotomy between rights and culture through the lens of the CSW and its commissioners from post-colonial states, focusing on cultural practices that allegedly violated the female body. Using the example of genital mutilation, Russo explores the tension between the colonizer and the colonized in the UN context. Chapter 6 discusses the entanglement of family and

socioeconomic development. The chapter effectively connects development, post-colonial state-building, and gender equality, demonstrating their interconnection in the UN agenda. Russo's final chapter tackles the concept of family planning. It shows how it was closely entangled with the fear of overpopulation and in turn integrated into socioeconomic development. Here, she retraces the final story of her book: the emergence of the liberal model of development and its close links with liberal and imperial feminism.

Women, Empires, and Body Politics is a welcome addition to the literature. However, it is regrettable that the premises of the CSW at the League of Nations are only referred to in a subtle manner, despite being the central elements of the CSW history. The history of the status of women in the interwar period could also make use of the imperial feminism perspective. Still, Russo's book successfully brings a critical analysis of the CSW actors, showing the complexity of their political beliefs. Her book participates in decoding the relationships between the Global South, especially African states, and the UN. *Women, Empires, and Body Politics* at the United Nations is thus not only useful to historians of women and gender history in an international context but also a good demonstration of the value of UN commissions as terrains to dive into the history of international organizations.

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, R. Leila J., *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement*, Princeton 1997.
- 2 S. Glenda and J. Carolyn, *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics since 1500*, Abingdon 2016.
- 3 See, for instance, J. Devaki, *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for*

Equality and Justice, Bloomington, collection United Nations Intellectual History Project, 2005. And more recently, the collective book R. Adami and P. Dan (eds.), *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights*, Routledge 2021.

Peter Burke: *Ignorance: A Global History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023, 310 pp.

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The study of phenomena of ignorance has become a flourishing field in the past decades. The study of science served as the starting point for the current interest in non-knowledge phenomena. Today, phenomena of non-knowledge are studied in fields such as sociology of knowledge, environmental sociology, anthropology, and organisational and political studies. Ignorance and various phenomena of non-knowledge have been studied in contexts of disaster management, modelling, experimental music, economic organizations, political decision making, or science, as the second edition of the handbook of ignorance studies impressively shows.¹ What is missing in this field so far is a historical perspective on ignorance.

In his book, the historian Peter Burke aims to provide this perspective on phenomena of ignorance. In chapter 1, facets of ignorance are outlined and related terms listed. Burke also hints at related phenomena such as uncertainty, errors, and forgetting. In