

BOOK REVIEW

Thematic Review: Neoliberalism and the Women's Movement in Aotearoa

***Neoliberalism and Its Impact on the Women's Movement in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Where Have All the Feminists Gone?* By Julia Schuster. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 219 pp. \$119.99 (cloth). ISBN: 9783030955229.**

***Activism, Feminism, Politics and Parliament.* By Margaret Wilson. Wellington, New Zealand: Bridget Williams, 2021. 320 pp. \$24.92 (paper). ISBN: 9781988587844. Also available as eBook.**

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X22000678

New Zealand has been famous for its state experiments since the nineteenth century, when it introduced women's suffrage, compulsory industrial arbitration, and noncontributory old-age pensions. In 1938, it again led the world when Labour prime minister Henry Savage introduced comprehensive welfare state provision, including free health care. So, it was all the more extraordinary when a Labour government in the 1980s once again led the way—this time dismantling New Zealand's historic welfare state in favor of neoliberal market solutions.

What impact did this have on the social movements that had emerged in the 1970s? The New Zealand women's movement seized political opportunities offered at the time to expand historical understandings of social justice as well as to challenge traditional divisions between public and private. The two books reviewed here provide different perspectives on the fate of the New Zealand women's movement when a pioneering welfare state changed into something much more marketized and unequal, but also more bicultural and multicultural.

Margaret Wilson was a 1970s feminist activist who became the first woman law professor and law dean in New Zealand, the first woman president of the

New Zealand Labour Party, the first woman attorney general, and the first woman speaker of the New Zealand House of Representatives, in addition to serving on the board of the Reserve Bank. All of this was despite experiencing lifelong pain from a prosthesis after losing a leg at the age of 18. Wilson chose to pursue her feminist goals through formal institutions and writes frankly about the obstacles she encountered.

Julia Schuster is a much younger Austrian feminist who took out a New Zealand PhD in 2014 on the Aotearoa/New Zealand women's movement, looking at three levels: individuals, organizations, and state feminism. She draws on interviews with activists and content analysis of the websites of women's organizations and official documents issued by government departments. While Schuster's use of the term "Aotearoa/New Zealand" reflects New Zealand's increased biculturalism, I refer here simply to "New Zealand."

Schuster adopts my own (Sawer 2010) characterization of women's movements as mobilizations of collective identity as women, sustaining women-centered discourses through time and making claims on behalf of women. She provides a careful examination of the impact of the neoliberal revolution on the New Zealand women's movement, providing extensive evidence from her respondents as well as engaging with international literature. The replacement of more collectivist with more individualist discourses and modes of operating has meant a changing political opportunity structure for feminist activism as well as changing forms of governmentality.

Additionally, Schuster situates the different waves of the New Zealand women's movement within the country's colonial history and its effects on the way that Māori and Pasifika women relate to the women's movement. While Māori women joined in the temperance and franchise struggles and gained the vote along with white women in 1893, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union made them pledge to give up traditional facial tattoos. More recently, a women's organization seeking to include Māori women balked when it was told that being a culturally safe space might entail a male elder being present at a women's event.

Overall, Schuster finds that feminist self-understandings have moved from celebration of solidarity to celebration of diversity, including diversity of gender and ethnic identity. Activists remain motivated through small victories won through "everyday feminism." At this micro level, digital technology has introduced new forms of online activism. Responsibility for self-care, part of neoliberal rationality, includes creating "feminist bubbles" online or in personal relationships, enabling a break from the patriarchal world.

While Schuster provides a close-up account of such individualized feminism, her findings concerning women's organizations and state feminism will have particular resonance elsewhere. For example, neoliberal competition policy leads to women's organizations having to compete on government terms for funding as service providers rather than being supported for their independent advocacy role. In addition to replacing collaboration with competition, funding contracts may contain "gag clauses," further restricting political agency.

At the state level, the Ministry of Women's Affairs (now Ministry for Women) struggles to keep women's issues on the political agenda, adopting neoliberal discourse in order to be heard. Equal employment opportunity is now about the economic benefit of greater participation in the labor market rather than social justice. The focus of pay equity policy shifts from structural concern with the undervaluing of work in the care sector to the encouragement of young women to enter the better-paid STEM sector.

Wilson saw these shifts from the inside, having decided to work through the New Zealand Labour Party to achieve goals such as equal pay. She saw clearly the contradictions between gender equality and market-driven economic policy, particularly the dismantling of New Zealand's historical tripartite arbitration system in favor of individual contracts. As president, Wilson had to hold the party together to keep it electable while also making policy interventions to try to protect the unions' role in wage bargaining.

Any saves in the area of industrial relations were undone with the election of the National Party in 1990. But, by the end of the decade, Labour had returned to government under Prime Minister Helen Clark, and Wilson became a senior cabinet minister, although only newly elected to parliament. As attorney general and associate minister of justice, Wilson was responsible for antidiscrimination and human rights reforms, the reform of matrimonial property law (and its application to *de facto* and same-sex relationships), and making a new Supreme Court the final court of appeal for New Zealand, abolishing the right of appeal to the U.K. Privy Council.

As minister of labor, Wilson had the task (along with Associate Minister Laila Harré) of trying to wind back the individualization of wage bargaining and introduce a new statutory framework for minimum employment standards. There was both obstruction by senior officials (trained in neoliberal economics) and an intense campaign by business interests. Raising the minimum wage, something of crucial importance to women workers, was opposed on the familiar but evidenceless grounds that it would increase unemployment (more recently, the same argument has been used against the Fair Pay Agreement legislation of Jacinda Ardern's government).

The campaign of opposition to the Employment Relations Bill became personal, and Wilson lost political favor. She accepted the role of speaker—where the physical discomfort of the speaker's chair intensified her awareness of the insensitivity of parliament to disability. She also had to deal with other uncomfortable aspects of a Westminster parliament. The major parties engaged in organized barracking that drowned out the voices of smaller political parties. She supported the adoption of a code of conduct that would enable all voices to be heard, but this was resisted by the major parties, in effect supporting bullying behavior as part of political culture. Today this is again a live issue.

There is much to learn from these two complementary books about "what a women's movement looks like in neoliberal times." Schuster provides a nuanced account of a women's movement continuing to operate at different levels, while Wilson provides a personal account of what it is like engaging at the state level with resistance to equality agendas. Wilson provides wonderful photos and rich

primary sources, while Schuster engages more with theoretical framings. Both deserve a place in the library.

References

Sawer, Marian. 2010. "Premature Obituaries: How Can We Tell If the Women's Movement Is Over?" *Politics & Gender* 6 (4): 602–9.

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