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Women's Movement Institutionalization: The Need for New Approaches

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The social movements that first flourished in the 1960s and 1970s were initially characterized by protest activity against the state and against dominant norms, and by their only loosely organized structures. Over time, however, these social movements, including feminism, have become partially institutionalized in government and nongovernment bodies, and in policies, practices, and social norms.

Political scientists and social movement scholars have long debated the effects of institutionalization on the prospects for movements to achieve their goals, as indeed have movement participants. The price of success has often been seen as high, and many have noted the risks of co-optation and incorporation. In social movement theory, institutionalization has traditionally been seen as signaling the end of the social movement in question. When we take into account new ideas about institutions and consider the perspectives of participants, however, a more complex picture emerges of the way in which social movements evolve.

I argue here that despite recent recognition by some social movement scholars that the focus on disruptive protests can be distorting (McAdam et al. 2005), social movement studies have yet to develop adequate accounts of institutionalization. These accounts remain simplistic and limited in several ways.

The recent histories of women's movements across the world demonstrate just how important it is to reconceptualize institutionalization. As Marian Sawer points out in this issue, while the death of the women's movement has been proclaimed for decades, on a worldwide level its projects and discourses continue in forms ever more closely entwined with formal institutions and accepted ways of doing things. At the same time, the integration of feminism into existing institutions and shared institutional forms makes feminist projects vulnerable — to marginalization within changing structures, to discursive shifts, to partisan changes of government, and to funding cuts. Meanwhile, feminists continue to debate the question of whether institutionalization actively depletes the resources and energy available for broader mobilization.

In response to these challenges, this essay shows how ideas developed as part of a new "feminist institutionalism" can contribute more nuanced understandings of institutionalization. Through a discussion of the Australian women's movement, the essay also draws out the theories and debates developed by social movement participants about their involvement in processes of institutionalization, perspectives that are too often overlooked.

The Australian Second-Wave Women's Movement

Studies of the Australian second-wave women's movement have highlighted the unusual degree to which feminist goals and processes were institutionalized in the Australian state and nongovernment services from an early stage (Chappell 2002). Beginning in the 1970s, Australia developed a unique model of women's policy machinery as organizations such as the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) initiated a turn to the state (Eisenstein 1996; Sawer 1990). The Labor government led by Gough Whitlam responded to feminist demands with a commitment to the development of new mechanisms within government by which issues of concern to women might be properly considered. The model of feminist policy machinery that resulted relied on a close relationship between activists in the women's movement and feminist activists within the bureaucracy (Magarey 2004, 127). Although some feminists argued against

state engagement, over time this approach became widespread, reflecting the imperative of contesting at their source the policies that continued to constrain gender equality (Bacchi 1999; Franzway, Court, and Connell 1989). The internationally remarkable model that developed from this relationship gave the rest of the world the "femocrat," the name for feminists appointed to positions in the bureaucracy with a specific mandate to improve policy outcomes for women.

Sawer (2007) and Sarah Maddison and Emma Partridge (2007) have recorded the decline of this model of gender analysis and policy coordination in Australia. Feminist groups could not mobilize broader resistance to this dismantling, perhaps affirming to the government that it could pursue this course of action without suffering electoral or "reputational" damage (Sawer 2007, 40; Teghtsoonian and Chappell 2008). Importantly, one of the factors identified as contributing to this erosion is the gradual disappearance from public view of an autonomous, active, and oppositional women's movement (Maddison and Partridge 2007).

The other stream of feminist institution building, women's nongovernment services such as shelters and women's health centers, has continued. These services have been variously supported and undermined by government policies and funding changes (see, for example, Murray 2005; Wainer and Peck 1995). In another layer of complexity, they are also now part of a large sector of government-funded but independently run community services across areas such as mental health, homelessness, and alcohol and other drug services. That is, as well as being distinct services with their own genealogy, women's services are also a subgroup of a broader sector. This institutional location sometimes supports women's services; at other times it makes it difficult for them to gain recognition for their distinctive role and history (Weeks 1996). As in Canada, government funding and accountability systems have promoted shifts to more formal governance models in feminist women's services, away from the hierarchically flat collectives that characterized them previously.

How Should We Understand Institutionalization?

In the study of social movements, institutionalization has traditionally been treated as synonymous with the end of the movement, or at least with the end of the phase that is of interest to social movement scholars. As David Meyer (1993, 157) has argued, "[m]ovements end when they reach some

sort of accommodation with the state and/or are either no longer interested or able to mount extra-institutional challenges." Institutionalization, in Meyer and Sidney Tarrow's view, is a combined process of "*routinization* of collective action, such that challengers and authorities can both adhere to a common script[;] *inclusion* and *marginalization*, whereby challengers who are willing to adhere to established routines will be granted access to political exchanges in mainstream institutions, while those who refuse to accept them can be shut out[; and] *cooptation*, which means that challengers alter their claims and tactics to ones that can be pursued without disrupting the normal practice of politics" (1998, 21).

In defining instutionalization in this and similar ways, social movement scholars tend to view it in terms of its (negative) effect on the capacity of the movement to sustain "extra-institutional challenges." Such definitions, therefore, neglect the more complex and less visible processes through which movement goals and values are partially adopted and then reconfigured by other institutions, that is, the kind of partial success that many movements experience, as described in the Australian case. As others have pointed out, it is difficult to imagine movements succeeding without the adoption of the movement's principles and discourses by powerful institutions, which itself implies the reconstitution of these principles into other frames of reference and other "logics of appropriateness" (Olsen 2007). This is a complex process that is not adequately captured by the notion of "co-optation."

Importantly, the complexity of these processes was to some extent understood and discussed by women's movement participants even at the height of extrainstitutional activism, through debates about reform versus revolution (see Andrew 2008). For example, movement theory supporting reform to gain the "preconditions for revolution," together with an understanding of the movement as functionally composed of different parts, enabled many feminists to reconcile their "practical" political action with a vision of the movement as a broader whole seeking revolutionary social change.

Another problem with Meyer and Tarrow's widely used definition of institutionalization is that it invokes a simplistic and dichotomous view of "authorities" (defined in terms of state authorities) and "challengers" (social movement activists). The history of the Australian women's movement and others, such as the U.S. and Canadian movements (see, e.g., Banaszak 2009; Chappell 2002) clearly shows that this dichotomy is too simple. For a start, the idea of a unitary, unchanging, and monolithic state has long been criticized by political scientists, who see

it as unable to capture the complexity and internal conflicts of government, as well as the changes that states undergo (McClurg Mueller and McCarthy 2003). Women's liberation activists also began working within the state and other institutions of authority quite early in the second-wave movement. With the growing influence of gender equality norms, feminists and gender analysis experts have themselves become authorities in this partially institutionalized field. While activism may have become less novel and therefore less visible to the general public, the principles of gender equality (at least in certain forms) have become more visible to policymakers.

There are certainly passionate discussions among feminists about the ultimate impact of these changes and to what extent they achieve the goals of the movement, but there is little doubt that an identifiable continuity exists between the early claims of women's movement activists and current institutional forms of gender equality work. Indeed, if there was not such continuity, the discussions would not be so passionate. In the Australian case, the clear losses within the women's policy machinery and the difficult recent history of women's services are difficult to assess from within the limited idea of a social movement ending with institutionalization.

Some of the problems with existing accounts of institutionalization within social movement studies may be addressed by taking a broader view of what we mean by institutions and how these relate to social change. Such a broader view is provided by a developing body of work in "new feminist institutionalism" (see Critical Perspectives essays in *Politics & Gender* 5 [June 2009]). Scholars working in this area are concerned mainly with developing methods for explaining the gendered nature of institutions and how and why this might change. They do not tend to focus explicitly on women's movements as groups of activists making claims. However, their work also yields some insights that can help us to develop a more nuanced understanding of social movement institutionalization.

Fiona Mackay, Surya Monro, and Georgina Waylen (2009, 255) draw on a view of institutions as "formal and informal collections of interrelated norms, rules and routines, understandings and frames of meaning that define 'appropriate' action and roles and acceptable behaviour of their members." Such a definition allows us to see institutions as more porous and changeable than indicated by the notions of institutionalization of social movement studies. Using this definition, we can see that, on the one hand, women's movement organizations and services can develop into institutions carrying forward feminist values, identities, and goals.

These institutions (such as shelters) may change over time in ways that are affected by other developments, such as a shift to more formal governance models, and not only by conditions directly imposed by government. On the other hand, the formal institutions that feminists have always wanted to change (governments, churches, universities, and so on) are founded on informal and norm-based practices that present both serious limitations and opportunities to feminist activism (Mackay, Monro, and Waylen 2009).

Teresa Kulawik (2009, 268) further argues that institutions are

> constituted by discursive struggles and can be understood as sedimented discourses .... The codes and schemas embedded in institutions, both normative and cognitive, may be reinterpreted, but in their daily routinized operations they are naturalized and therefore not open for contestation.

Applying this understanding of institutions to the women's movement, we can draw out one of the key differences between the parts of the movement that were relatively spontaneous and unstructured and those parts that have become institutionalized: The latter have been able to establish codes and schemas that may be contested but are at least partially accepted and naturalized. In contrast, it is useful to look at one of the key features of the women's liberation stream of the movement, which was, in the Australian case as elsewhere, a commitment to personal transformation as the core of social change. This involved first exploring "what is the personal" in an issue and only on that basis proceeding to develop and share an analysis. Understanding the value attached to this "method" helps to explain why institutionalization has been seen in such a negative light by some participants: Establishing some feminist beliefs and codes as "taken for granted" removes the need for rigorous and continual self-assessment, and the potential for experiences of revelation that such a process can offer.

Conclusion

Notions of institutionalization in social movement studies are too focused on movements' interaction with the state and do not pay enough attention to movement-based efforts to form new institutions, such as shelters. The state and "institutional politics" are too often seen as unitary, static, and not subject to change — a significant shortcoming inasmuch as one of the main preoccupations of social movements has been institutional and political change. In defining movements as inherently and exclusively

extrainstitutional, social movement studies have failed to recognize the institutions (broadly conceived) that are present in and around movements even in their earlier stages. Perhaps most importantly, approaches that treat institutionalization as anathema to social movements fail to grapple adequately with the complex ways in which activists have tried to embed their values and discourses in existing institutions, create new institutions, and take the opportunities presented by institutional change — and the challenges and problems involved. Feminist institutionalism provides some intellectual resources for a project of reconceptualizing social movement institutionalization.

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The Limits of Protest Event Data and Repertoires for the Analysis of Contemporary Feminism

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Protest event analysis (PEA) and the related concept of repertoire of contention are widely used in the study of social movements. Are they appropriate for the study of feminist protest? I argue that conventional forms of protest event analysis may have significant limitations when applied to feminist protest. Unobtrusive or individualized forms of resistance and protest associated with feminism are difficult to measure through typical protest event data. Moreover, the concept of repertoires of contention retains within it a number of unwarranted gendered assumptions. Some flow from being too reliant upon protest event data. I suggest that repertoires may be gendered, that this is unacknowledged by those who use the concept, and that this has implications for its normative dimensions.

The Trouble with PEA

PEA has proved attractive as it facilitates the consideration of a wide variety of movements and actions, enabling both historical-comparative analyses