

Legacies and Agents: Women's Movement Institutions in Australia

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Abstract

This paper explores some theoretical and methodological issues involved in mapping social movement institutionalisation. It reflects on the development of a database designed to track the emergence and disappearance of feminist institutions in Australia. The paper considers how data on institutionalisation might be used to help evaluate the changing fortunes of a social movement, and examines the limitations of institutionalisation data in making such evaluations, in particular by clarifying some contested and ambiguous meanings of institutionalisation.

Keywords: institutionalisation, social movement, feminism, women's policy machinery.

Introduction

The Mapping the Australian Women's Movement project studies the evolution of the movement from 1970 to 2005 through three strands: its protest events, its institutional development and its discursive legacy. Observing these three strands over time will enable us to ask questions such as whether the movement is 'over', 'in abeyance' or thriving in new but under-recognised channels. The project also considers whether the reduced level of visible opposition from the women's movement has undermined the viability of Australian feminist institutions.

At its broadest level, the project aims to investigate how the recent decades of the Australian women's movement should best be interpreted, and reflects on the adequacy of some major theories of social movement evolution. One common view is that once social movements no longer engage in visible protest activities that challenge the social order, and once they change their organisational forms to be more structured and institutional, there is no longer any reason to distinguish them from the

ordinary workings of interest groups in the policy process. This shift is often seen as part of the natural life-cycle of social movements (Tarrow 1998), an analysis that accords with the widely-expressed view that the women's movement is over.

In contrast, some women's movement scholars have reflected on the long and intermittent history of feminism to develop the concept of *abeyance*. *Abeyance* describes quiet periods in the lives of social movements, when movement identities and values are kept alive through friendship networks and non-confrontational organisations until the next 'wave' of activism (Rupp and Taylor 1987, Bagguley 2002).

In the context of these general questions about social movement change, the present paper considers how data about social movement institutionalisation can help in assessing the state of a movement, and what limitations this data might have. For the institutional component of the study, a database is being constructed that contains longitudinal information about the establishment and, where applicable, dismantling of women's policy units and women's services (such as refuges, rape crisis centres and women's health centres) at the federal, state and local level in Australia. But what weight and significance should we give, for example, to the establishment of the Elsie refuge for women and children in Sydney in 1974, or the abolition of the Women's Bureau in the federal employment portfolio in 1997? More specifically, what underlying theories and principles should guide the way we interpret such developments?

The Australian case study is internationally significant because women's movement activities were institutionalised in the state and in non-government services at a relatively early stage in Australia — and because in Australia numerous feminist institutions have been dismantled in recent years, at the same time as many other

countries have begun to develop similar agencies and systems. One of the reasons suggested to explain why governments have found it fairly easy to downgrade and dismantle women's institutions is because of a lack of visible opposition from autonomous women's movement groups (Maddison and Partridge 2007). By mapping the development (and dismantling) of feminist institutions over time against the pattern of visible protest events, the project offers the possibility of observing such dynamics.

One of the working assumptions of the project is that the existence, location and resources of women's institutions are indicators of the health of the women's movement, or are linked in some positive way to its fortunes and its goals (see for example Maddison and Partridge 2007). But the exact nature of this link is not obvious. The aim of this paper is therefore to untangle some of the implicit meanings attached to institutions and institutionalisation, and to relate these to the recent history of the Australian women's movement.

The paper reflects on the long-running debates about whether institutionalisation is a negative or positive development for social movements, drawing not only on sociological theory, but also on the applied discussions between feminist bureaucrats, women's advocacy organisations and others (Sawer 2006:112–113). In the course of addressing these different views of institutionalisation, the paper explores two overlapping (but sometimes conflicting) meanings of 'institution.' The final section of the paper outlines some methodological implications of these disputed meanings and reflects on the approach taken in the present project.

Institutionalisation: Ambiguity

There is a fundamental ambiguity at the heart of the idea of social movement institutionalisation. When we speak about institutions and institutionalisation, we may be referring to the entrenchment of *established practices and customs*, or to the development of *specific organisations or agencies*, or perhaps both. The Oxford English Dictionary delineates these meanings as ‘established law, custom, usage, practice, organization, or other element in the political or social life of a people’, and ‘establishment, organization, or association, instituted for the promotion of some object, esp. one of public or general utility, religious, charitable, educational’.

The former meaning focuses on stability within the social order, which is seemingly at odds with the idea of social movements challenging established laws, customs and practices. The second meaning, however, encompasses organisations or associations established to carry on the goals of social movements. A focus on women’s movement institutions highlights the tensions between these two meanings by directing our attention to organisations that are (somewhat) established within the existing order, but are also oriented towards changing the institutional framework in the broader sense of the term. These tensions run through both the positive and negative accounts of institutionalisation.

Institutionalisation: Negative Accounts

There is a strong tradition of inquiry that defines social movements as inherently, and valuably, non-institutional (Touraine 1985; Melucci 1989). These accounts suggest a link between the movement’s ability to resist the institutionalisation of its organisational forms, and its ability to resist the institutionalisation (here, cooption) of its claims by the existing social order (Piven and Cloward 1979; McAdam *et al* 2005). In this tradition, social movements are presumed to be naturally, essentially (or at

least initially) non-institutional, both in terms of their value claims and their organisational forms. Over time, the forms taken by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s have converged with the traditional forms of civil society organisations, challenging such distinctions.

There are good reasons, though, to question whether social movements are inherently non-institutional in the first place. It is true that, especially at first, social movements often do not take the form of ‘establishments, organisations, or associations instituted for the promotion of some object.’ But movements certainly *involve* established organisations and associations, even in their early phases. Established organisations often play ‘host’ to the emergence of new social movement groups and ideas. Later in the ‘life-cycle’ other organisations incorporate these ideas into their own practices and go on to promote them.

In terms of established custom, the claim that social movements are non-institutional seems strong, in that they are oriented to social change. But they also draw on certain ‘established laws, customs, usages, practices’, most notably, established ‘repertoires of action’ (Tilly 2004). Similarly, Crossley (2003) has described a ‘radical habitus’, which socially reproduces the predisposition to protest. There are also elements of the social order that are not challenged by any given movement. A social movement can be deeply opposed to a certain kind of systemic injustice, but callously unaware that it is continuing another — as in the treatment of women by men in the anti-war movement in countries such as the US, UK and Australia.

Social movements create, within themselves, norms and customs that they are trying to spread more broadly, as in Breines’ (1982) notion of ‘prefigurative politics’. Symbolic interactionists, too, have stressed the norm-generating capacity of social

movements. Herbert Blumer defined social movements as ‘collective enterprises to establish a new order of life.’ (1951:199) In his view, conflict between groups, an inevitable part of social transformation, generates the need for new norms, which movements play an important role in generating. So even if movements begin with ideas and impulses towards unsettling established customs, they also try to practice, spread and entrench new norms.

Institutionalisation can therefore be interpreted as the transformation of the social order to reflect the principles and goals of the social movement. How then could any supporter be opposed to such institutionalisation? Of course, the transformation is not complete, and there is disagreement about to what extent it has even begun. Movement participants might also object to the functionalism of Blumer’s account, in which social change can be seen as an accommodation mediating between different social groups.

For the women’s movement, one great difficulty is that it is hard to know what to do about half-successes. It is often said that it is that it is more difficult to mobilise in conditions where nothing is quite as bad, or as obviously bad, as it used to be. At times this view can lapse into nostalgia, a risk about which many feminists such as UK feminist Zoe Fairbairns are wryly aware:

In her poem, ‘The Old Feminist’, the US poet Phyllis McGinley (who died in 1978) pokes fun at the ageing activist who, after a lifetime of heady campaigning and some successes,

‘..Takes no pleasure in her rights
Who so enjoyed her wrongs.’

I don’t want to be like her, so I must try not to wallow too much in nostalgia as I look back through my rose-tinted spectacles at the Feminist Seventies — the good old days when everything was so terrible. (Fairbairns 2002:7)

Feminists concerned about the institutionalisation of the movement sometimes regret that it leaves little space for the qualities of emergence that made the 1960s and 1970s movements distinctive: novel forms of action; the discovery of new interests and identities. Others looking back over the longer history of feminism note that each 'wave' has emerged from the husks of older organisations and past successes, dissatisfied with these but nevertheless nurtured by them (Maddison and Scalmer 2006).

Institutionalisation: Positive Accounts

As noted above, the institutionalisation of a movement can be taken to mean its success. In terms of 'established practices and customs,' if a movement is institutionalised this means its values and principles have become part of the official and unofficial ideas about 'how we do things'. Institutionalisation in this sense focuses on the effects of the movement in policy and law and in everyday conventions and practices. Institutionalisation can be seen as the enduring effects of the movement on the values and practices of people who are 'outside the movement', or do not identify as activists within it. For some feminist social scientists, institutionalism as a research approach is seen as supporting inquiries about how gendered institutions, and gender as an institution, can be changed in this way (e.g. Waylen 2009).

In the other sense, if a movement is institutionalised, it means it has formed into relatively clear and durable institutions: organisations or agencies that are identified as being within (or from, or for) the movement. This can be seen as 'a continuation of the movement by other means'. For example, in the US context Marx Ferree and Yancey Martin (1995) have identified feminist organisations as the 'harvest of the

new women's movement' and as 'doing the work of the movement'. The formation of definite institutions can be a way to build stability, durability and sustainability into the movement, after the first energy has gone (and after early participants have died, moved on into jobs made possible by the movement, become 'time-poor' and so on).¹

The development of structured public organisations and units within government might also provide for more rigour and inclusiveness, compared with the loose networks which have long been criticised from within the movement for their undemocratic reliance on personal friendships and dominance by powerful personalities (Freeman 1972). Women's movement institutions can also assist in the inter-generational transfer of movement ideals, as young women are brought into (some) organisations and learn about the movement through these.

These two positive senses of institutionalisation can be seen as reinforcing each other. Feminist institutions (services, organisations, agencies) can contribute to the institutionalisation of feminist ideals and values. It might be expected that, likewise, the institutionalisation of feminist values (for example, the widespread expectation that women will have access to paid work of their choice, or reproductive control) would provide a supportive context for feminist institutions. But is this so? A common observation is that one of the reasons why there is now so little popular support for feminism as a political movement (and why the movement struggles to find self-identifying adherents) is that its goals have been institutionalised in the sense of such widely-held norms and values. So, for example, it is said that young women do not see the need for feminism, because its values are so well-entrenched that its operation as an oppositional movement does not seem appropriate or necessary. Given that feminist institutions are animated by their status as advocates for social change,

the entrenchment of some values associated with feminism might not actually be supporting, but rather obscuring their efforts at further change.

Conclusion

The paper has identified that the impulse to build permanence is an important factor in institutionalisation, both in terms of creating permanent social change, and in terms of creating (relatively) permanent institutions to work towards that change. The paper has highlighted a tension between two aspects of feminist institutions: they are both durable outcomes or legacies of the movement, and also agents through which the movement may be continued in different forms. As workers in feminist institutions sometimes ponder, ‘shouldn’t we be aiming to make our our organisation obsolete?’ For good reasons, though, few willingly give up the hard-won institutional presence and voice, which in many cases would mean abandoning projects established by activists in past eras of the movement with whom they identify, and walking away from the acute service needs and obvious injustices that motivated their participation in the first place.

In terms of the present research project, there is a need to further articulate the link between feminist institutions and broader institutional change, drawing on existing work such as that by Sawyer (1990), Ferree and Martin (1995) and Mackay (2009). In this context, it also needs to be made explicit that our longitudinal survey of feminist institutions is connected with but does not directly measure the other sense of institutionalisation: the entrenchment of customs and practices as part of the social order.

While the project operates with a fairly positive view of feminist institutions, interpreting these as indicators of the fortunes of the movement, the paper has clarified that any such interpretation depends on an assessment of current social conditions, on contextual information about the relationship of the institutions in question to the movement and on widely-contested theories about how social change is achieved.

Notes:

- 1 I am grateful to Drude Dahlerup for pointing out the importance of this impulse to build permanence through movement institutions.

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