On the Streets and in the State: How Do Protest Events Relate to State Feminism?

Merrindahl Andrew and Kirsty McLaren

Abstract

This paper interrogates some common assumptions about social movements, focusing on the relationship between feminist protest events and institution-building. It uses data from a unique project tracking the evolution of the Australian women’s movement to consider how feminist protests, feminist services and feminist policy agencies developed in the Australian sub-national state of New South Wales between 1970 and 2005. The general view of social movement evolution is that an early protest phase produces a subsequent response in the form of institution-building, which in turn displaces extra-institutional activity. Scholars of state feminism have also argued that gender equality projects within the state cannot survive and prosper without support from a mobilised and visible women’s movement. Although there are many narrative accounts of protest/institution relationships, this paper represents the first attempt to assess these relationships by analysing quantitative chronological data.

Introduction

The relationship between protest and institutionalisation has always been a vexed one in social movements such as feminism. Although activists have often been concerned about losing the movement’s vitality and the possibility of co-option, most social movements have developed institutions intended to continue the their social change projects. Protest has typically been the visible, and more colourful, element of social movements, graphically illustrating discontent and visions of a different future. In contrast, even those institutions inspired by social movements are enmeshed with other institutions, relying on them for legitimacy, authority and resources. This makes them inextricably linked with the status quo, even as they attempt to alter it.

A widely-held view is that there is a sequence of institutionalisation, in which protest movements are replaced by organisations, in which the energy for social change is gradually replaced by technocratic concerns about the maintenance of organisational strength and identity. Not enough attention has been given to the variety of effects and dynamics that might occur between protest events and institutions, beyond this simple – and pessimistic – teleological account. This paper does not attempt to evaluate the capacity of organisations to continue social change activism, but it does draw on new qualitative data to question
assumptions about the relationship between protest and institutions, and to suggest alternative perspectives.

**Protest and institution-building**

Social movement scholarship has traditionally viewed institutionalisation in negative terms. The transformation of a social movement into established organisations, legislative agendas and more predictable forms of activism might achieve some tangible gains, but is also seen as signalling a loss of radical “edge” and the risk of cooption (Piven and Cloward 1979). 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 cooption of its claims by the existing social order (McAdam et al. 2005). The gains of institutionalisation are seen as particularly meagre when institutionalisation is “premature”; that is, when an issue’s too-early incorporation in public policy agendas causes the end of street mobilisation (Wieviorka 2005; Yamasaki 2009: 494).

Despite the misgivings of some activists, most of the major social movements of the mid-late 20th century, including feminism, environmentalism, and the civil rights movement, have led to the creation of organisations and institutional forms, both “outside government” (usually known as social movement organisations or SMOs) and inside government. Most political actors both within and beyond the state tend to agree that the creation or abolition of such structures sends important signals about the extent to which social change projects are supported by the government, whether or not these political actors agree about the effectiveness or appropriateness of the organisations or agencies in question.

In the social movement literature, there has been little quantitative analysis of the institutionalisation of movements. Analysis has tended to focus on activist groups shifting from disruptive protest (such as rallies, sit-ins etc) to ‘insider tactics’ (such as letter-writing, petitions, press statements etc) (Soule and Earl 2005), and has neglected the innovations in institution-building that flow from social movements. This approach ignores the fact that, in social movement organisations and the agencies within government that have arisen out of social movements, the impetus to further social change is “institutionalised” as the rationale for the organisation’s existence.

Where state responses to social movements have been analysed, research has been overly concerned with the policing and regulation of protest events (Meyer and Tarrow eds 1998; Soule and Earl 2005). This focus on state responses to protest events neglects the proliferation of special-purpose agencies and legislation that respond (however imperfectly) to the issues initially raised by protest. While the public policy literature does recognise social movements as sources of new issues for the policy agenda (e.g. Marsh 2002: 222), little attention has been paid to how social movements’ issue-raising gets transformed into the development of lasting (or fragile) organisations and institutions.
As a quantitative method of mapping social movement activity, protest event analysis – one of the methods used here – is itself inflected by the North American focus on protest activity as a typical, or even the defining, characteristic of social movements (Tilly 1999; McAdam et al. 2005). This reflects the visibility of protest activity, but elides the very important role of activism outside of the public sphere and public space. That is, the ways that scholars map changing levels of protest, especially past protest, has shaped accounts of social movement history.

**Expected patterns**

The relationship between extra-institutional and institutionally-based action is more complex than the literature has reflected so far. For social movements, this is an important question, because there are potential gains and losses from each ‘strategy’, particularly if adopting one enhances or diminishes the likely effectiveness of the other, and particularly if the nature of these effects change over time throughout the movement ‘life-cycle’. Particular concerns are focused on the following scenarios: institutionalisation leading to a loss of impetus in protest activism; a loss of impetus in protest activism leading to reduced opportunities for (productive) institutionalisation; the gains of institutionalisation being particularly low if institutionalisation is ‘premature’; and the potential for the gains of institutionalisation to be vulnerable if there is no longer an active, visible and oppositional form of protest activism.

There are limits to what the chronological data can tell us, but if these concerns are valid, we should expect to see (broadly): (1) peaks in institution-building following peaks in protest; (2) protest events declining while institution-building increases; and then (3) institutions being abolished and ending as protest declines or stagnates at a low level.

In relation to partisan changes of government, the election of left-wing governments has been associated with a more powerful role for women’s movement institutions (Teghtsoonian & Chappell 2008). If this pattern holds, we would expect to see correspondence between the timing of peaks in institution-building and changes of government from conservative to progressive governments (and vice versa, with the abolition/ending of organisations occurring after the election of more conservative governments). On the other hand, though, scholars have suggested that two dynamics may shape the relationship between changes of government and levels of public protest (across all social movements). First, conservative or ‘right-wing’ governments might provoke more protest, because their policies are opposed to most social movement claims. Second, though, there is some indication that there may be more protest under ‘left-wing’ or progressive governments; it is speculated that this may be because these governments are more receptive to social movement claims. Regardless, claims for better or different services and policies are presumed to underpin a significant portion of social movement activism, so charting protestor demands may provide some insight into these dynamics.
Methods: the two databases

Institutional analysis

The institutions database aims to map the emergence and, where relevant, the disappearance over time of all the institutions that grew out of the second-wave women’s movement in Australia, between 1970 and 2005. This is the first attempt to create a longitudinal record of all the institutions that have grown out of a social movement. In this paper, the data for New South Wales is analysed. In the government category, the database includes women’s policy agencies, statutory bodies, inter-agency and inter-governmental bodies, women’s information services and consultative mechanisms. The non-government organisations include community-based women’s services such as refuges (shelters), sexual assault services, women’s health centres, women’s legal services and working women’s centres. At present, the database contains information about more than 470 organisations at the national and sub-national levels, comprising more than 900 entries about events such as establishment, abolition, relocation and de-funding. A subset of 142 NSW organisations is analysed in this paper. For each organisation, an entry includes the following fields: year of establishment; whether in existence at 2005; year of abolition/end (if ended before 2005); jurisdiction (government or non-government; national or sub-national government); location (by State/Territory or Australia-wide); type of organisation (e.g. central women’s policy unit, women’s advisory council, women’s health centre, refuge/shelter etc); and source (document or interview details).

The database functions we have developed from this dataset enable us readily to identify patterns of longevity and vulnerability across different groups of institution, something that has not yet been done in social movement studies. For example, we are now able to compare institutional longevity by sector or by type of institution or by jurisdiction.

Data collection has involved a variety of research methods, including archival/documentary research and interviews. There is no routine method of gathering the relevant information, as there is in survey-based research. Unlike protest event databases, which generally source their entries from a given set of source documents (typically newspapers), there is no pre-defined set of sources within which one could hope to find comprehensive information about the establishment and abolition of women’s institutions. This is because of the size and diversity of the organisational field under study: it spans both government and non-government organisations, and it includes agencies addressing a wide range of feminist concerns, from the gender biases of fiscal policy to the housing needs of women escaping domestic violence. This diversity attests to the vast scope of feminism itself, making it all the more important that an attempt is made to track its institutional legacy as a whole, and not only in terms of its constituent sub-sectors.

The process of data collection has revealed the precarious nature of the institutions themselves, and in particular their dependence on political constituencies not only for their survival but also for their ability to record their existence and, where applicable, their demise.
In the case of government agencies, the key barrier to research is the politicised nature of machinery of government changes. It is often noted that Australian political parties make ever more strenuous efforts to manage public perception (MacDermott 2008). The negative effects of this image-management on public debate, policy development and political careers are also often noted. Another effect, less often highlighted, is the resulting obfuscation about the establishment and abolition of agencies, especially those whose purpose is overtly linked to political constituencies. Governments often enthusiastically announce “new” agencies, which are actually just re-named versions of existing bodies, and are silent about their abolition of other agencies (Andrew 2011).

In terms of non-government women’s organisations, data until now has been largely piecemeal and often focused on particular types of services rather than the field as a whole. Longitudinal data, in particular, has been lacking (for a partial exception see Weeks 1994). The resources and attentions of individual organisations are understandably focused on the day-to-day necessities of running the organisation and providing services, not on recording histories. Nevertheless, one of the surprises of the study has been the extent of efforts made by women’s services to record their histories. In fact, these efforts surpass those of the much more well-resourced government agencies whose histories are so often obscured by the positioning tactics of governing political parties. This disparity may be because non-government women’s services recognise from a feminist perspective the political importance of maintaining women’s history, including the history of women’s collective efforts to liberate and empower ourselves.

**Protest event analysis**

Protest event analysis has only rarely been used to comprehensively map events relating to the women’s movement, although studies of protest events as a whole (across various movements) have included some women’s movement events. The method involves charting the occurrence of protest events and their characteristics. This enables researchers to:

- systematically map, analyse, and interpret the occurrence and properties of large numbers of protests by means of content analysis, using sources such as newspaper reports and police records. These protest data, in turn, can be linked to other kinds of data in order to study the causes and consequences of protest (Koopmans and Rucht, 2002: 231).

This allows for the trajectory of a movement to be mapped both over time and over a large geographic area, while also allowing for a detailed analysis of the issues of concern to the movement and the tactics it uses.

The recent digitisation of many news sources has allowed for more detailed and much faster searches of publications to displace the older sampling processes. The protest database, taking full advantage of this, draws from the digitised, searchable archives of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (01/01/1970 – 31/08/1986), and the Factiva database of Australian newspapers (covering *Sydney Morning Herald* from 01/09/1986; *The Age* from 1991 and most other major newspapers from 1996, 1997 or 1998), we have ensured that there is
complete coverage of one publication, and a good representation of others. In addition, two alternative sources have been used: *The Tribune* (the newspaper of the Australian Communist party) and the newsletter of the Women’s Electoral Lobby, *WELinformed*. For this paper, the data from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the New South Wales broadsheet, has been used most: as the most complete, mainstream record of protest events, it offers a good approximation of what protest was visible in the media.

To be included in the database as a “protest event”, an event had to satisfy a three-pronged test. It had to, first, constitute *organised collective action* aiming to achieve change in society and involving a performative element that distinguished it from everyday activity. Second, it needed to occur in somewhere, in a physical location, and to be *public*. Third, to be a ‘women’s movement event’, the main participants were usually be women, or the emphasis on issues relating to women’s interests. That is, the protesters’ claims must be framed as claims made *as women* or *for women*.

The elements of this test accord with the literature on social movements: an “event” is an “unconventional method of political participation”, and Taylor and Van Dyke (2004: 263) place both “confrontational tactics” such as demonstrations and “cultural forms of political expression such as rituals, spectacles” and so on, in contrast to conventional tactics. Taylor and Van Dyke (2004) argue that collective identity is a fundamental element of all social movement tactics, evoking the ‘imagined community’ which joins the loose networks of individuals and groups that make up a social movement (Burgmann 2003: 4).

This large search yielded a wealth of information, and a high level of detail was recorded on each report found. Obvious information such as the date and place of the event were entered, along with the source of the article and where possible the name of the journalist. Each report was the classified in terms of the type of event that was held and the issues that were central to it.

Using media reports to map the activities of protest movements, however, runs the risk of conflating media reports with the actual activities of protesters. Social movements can have a life that is very separate to what is reported about them. Moreover, large, violent or disruptive events are more likely to be covered than smaller, recurring events. (Soule and Earl 2005).

There is, therefore, a risk of gender-blindness in using protest as a measure of social movement activism: “conventional forms of protest event analysis may have significant limitations when applied to feminist protest as unobtrusive or individualised forms of resistance and protest associated with feminism are difficult to measure through typical protest event data.” (Bagguley 2010: 616). Bagguley suggests that the very way protests are conceptualised has a masculine bias, and aggressive, public events of a large size are therefore more likely to be privileged as meaningful social movement action. We have identified two phenomena in our data that may partially mitigate this masculine bias in news reporting (McLaren 2011). First, at times women journalists have taken up women’s movement concerns. Second, sometimes the fact that women were taking part in actions that were distinctly ‘unfeminine’ in their nature – that thus *disrupted* gender norms – has garnered
more coverage: disruption can be achieved in social or discursive registers as well as through violence, inconvenience or property damage. Thus, we concur with Sandra Grey (2010), who has argued that, if interpreted with caution, mapping protests may be a valuable and insightful way of studying the women’s movement.

Most importantly, using media reports can be an effective way to measure the visibility of a movement, and hence can tell us something about the impact that the movement had. As Koopmans and Rucht (2002: 252) note, the “constructed reality” of protest event analysis, “is of extreme importance for both policymakers and the wider public.” It is through media coverage that most people, and most politicians, encounter most social movement activity (see also Meyer and Staggenborg 2007).

Results

Figures 1 to 3 below present data on New South Wales. Figure 1 shows the number of institutions being established or abolished each year. Figure 2 maps the two publications which are comprehensively mapped in the protest database. There is some difference between the trends in events reported by the Sydney Morning Herald and the Tribune. This is due to different patterns of news coverage: the Tribune entries include many claims for labour rights and strikes which are not included in the Sydney Morning Herald. Conversely, several protests about the justice system and domestic violence are reported by the latter publication. The Tribune appears to cover more regional and small events, whilst the Herald includes more events from different strands of the women’s movement. Therefore, Figure 3 used the Sydney Morning Herald data only, as it seems more representative.
Figure 1. Women’s organisations (government and non-government) – New South Wales – Number of establishment events and abolition/end events, by year 1970-2005, and partisan changes of State government

Notes: NSW women’s organisations included are 96 NGOs (64 refuges, 21 Women's Health Centres, 3 generalist/multi-purpose women's services, 2 Sexual Assault Services, 2 Women's Legal Services, 1 women-specific alcohol and other drug service, 1 non-refuge women's housing organisation, 1 women's information service, 1 Working Women's Centre) and 46 government organisations (27 Sexual Assault Services, 8 agency policy units, 3 versions of a Central Women's Policy Coordination/Office, 2 agency Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) units, 1 combined agency policy unit/network, 1 central EEO agency, 1 main Women's Advisory Committee, 1 rights and anti-discrimination statutory mechanism, 1 Women's Budget Program, 1 women's information service).
Figure 2. Women’s movement protests – New South Wales – reported in *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Tribune*, by year 1970-2005

![Bar graph showing women's movement protests in Sydney Morning Herald and The Tribune, New South Wales, 1970-2005. The graph includes two timelines: one for SMH and another for Tribune, with each showing a peak in protests around 1970-1972 and a decline thereafter. The Tribune ceased publication in 1991.](image)

Figure 3. Establishment of rape crisis and sexual assault services compared to women’s movement protests about sexual and other violence (reported in *Sydney Morning Herald*) – New South Wales – by year 1970-2005

![Line graph showing establishment events and protest events in Sydney Morning Herald, New South Wales, 1970-2005. The graph includes a peak in establishment events around 1984 and a peak in protest events around 1970.](image)
Discussion of findings

It is difficult, given the uncertainty about media coverage, to identify exact levels of protest activism; indeed, this ambiguity or partial visibility is characteristic of social movement activity. Generally, though, it seems that the hypotheses outlined above are not supported by the data (drawing on McLaren 2011): (1) peaks in institution-building occurred at approximately the same time as peaks in protest activism (in the mid-1970s and the early to mid-1980s); (2) where declines have occurred, these have been at approximately the same times as well; and (3) the majority of organisations (and this is especially true of non-government women’s services) have survived despite declines in the amount of protest activity. However, there were many fewer organisations being established once protest had declined to low levels.

This is interesting, but we should keep in mind that it is a fairly complex story to be looking for in the patterns of broad datasets. Small variations or errors in the data could obscure patterns that might lead to different conclusions. Could analysis of events and institutions by specific issue areas help, by giving us more precise information about chronological order? In some issue areas, as Figure 3 shows, it seems that institution-building did not follow after peaks in protest; this will be discussed further below.

The results suggest that we should (continue to) question the idea that there is strong causation between protest and institutionalisation. The data is consistent with a different view that there could be some ‘independent’ factor causing rises and declines in both protest activism and institution-building to occur at similar times. Importantly, too, the survival of (some types of) organisations seems not to be dependent on protest activism occurring at high levels.

It is possible that, as some claim, the energy going into maintaining organisations reduces the energy available in the movement for protest; this would be consistent with the long-run decline we see in protest activism, at the same time as the majority of organisations are surviving. The question that would follow then is whether that is a problem for the movement, and the answer would have to depend on how valuable protest is (what gains are achieved and what other needs it might meet in terms of collective identity and so on), and how effective organisations are in working towards the goals of the movement.

In relation to the partisan complexion of government, our emerging evidence on the establishment and abolition of agencies provides some limited support for the view that conditions for institution-building are most conducive under more left-wing governments. In NSW (see Figure 1 above), the two peaks for the establishment of women’s organisations occurred largely within a Labor term of government, noting that in Australia the Liberal party is the more conservative of the two major parties. Although the second peak appears to cross over into the Liberal government (elected in 1988), in fact the roll-out of a large number of sexual assault services between 1987 and 1989 was the result of a health policy review and funding commitment by the earlier Labor government (Carmody 1990).
The picture after 1988 is, however, more complex: the number of establishment events did decline under the Liberal government, but did not pick up again after the Labor party regained power in 1995. Likewise, the closure/abolition of agencies after 1995 continued at a similar (albeit low) rate despite the election of the more left-wing Labor government. This suggests that partisan changes of government may affect, but do not determine, the fates of women’s movement institutions. We must look further afield to develop a fuller picture of why these institutions flourish when they do, and dwindle at other times.

Protests and institutions: an alternative account

Most importantly, then, our comparison of data shows protest activity and institutionalisation peaking and declining at roughly the same times; the first peak of ‘second-wave’ protest and institutionalisation are particularly close. The most logical conclusion from this is that there is a common source for the energy behind both protest and institutional activity. This accords with a view of the movement as a whole that operates in diverse spheres at once. It also fits with the documented Australian experience of individuals working inside and outside government at the same time activist individuals fruitfully working across different spheres (Sawer 1990; Eisenstein 1996; Reid 2011). So when protests and institutionalisation peak, they peak together, and when they slump, they slump together. However, institutions do seem able to live on, despite the downturn in protest activity. The most pressing question, then, is whether and to what extent they remain activist institutions effectively working towards social change.

We would suggest that it is necessary to consider, seriously, the radicalism of institutions, and to be more nuanced in how we conceptualise institutions - some may genuinely embody radical visions for social change in their very existence and purpose, and in the everyday practices of members, staff or those accessing services. The spontaneity and apparent disorder of protest is not the only marker of radicalism: many women’s institutions worked to develop alternative structures that would “put into practice feminist visions of the democratic process in social relationships” and create social change in everyday life (Weeks 1996: 22). Placing discursive work at the centre of our definition of social movement activity – the work of interpreting experiences and communicating ideas – allows us to see discursive action in protest, in commemoration, and in institutions. In short, there are meanings created through, embodied in, movement institutions’ work.

Indeed, institutions may sometimes sustain protest rather than displace it. Institutions may organise protests, and our data from regional newspapers (the Illawarra Mercury and Newcastle Herald in particular) demonstrates that, for instance, rape crisis centres and sexual assault services have been major actors organising regional Reclaim the Night events. In fact, institutions, with their recognisable bricks-and-mortar presence and ‘insider tactics’ (such as sending out media releases) may sometimes have increased the legitimacy of protest events, and garnered greater media coverage. Figure 5 supports this speculation by demonstrating
that, in this area at least, the peaks in women’s movement protests occurred after the peaks in institutionalisation.

This possibility of institutional radicalism mirrors Gwendolyn Gray Jamieson’s (2012) recent account of the Australian women’s health movement. Gray describes how both liberal and radical feminists worked together to create women’s health centres which brought into being a new image of health and the social determinants of health. Though these would be classified as ‘insider strategies’, Gray’s history focuses on the radical implications of this constructive work. Rather than sapping the energy of participants, the institutions of the women’s health movement are depicted as sustaining momentum and energy. Donna della Porta (2008) has argued that social movement scholars need to pay more attention to the positive aspects of emotions in social movements, and that protests can create and reaffirm shared identities that sustain activism beyond the specific protest events. At least some of the time, it seems that institutions can have similar impacts on social movements as protest events, being sites where ideas are developed and claims articulated, shared identities are reinforced and constructive emotional connections fostered.

**Conclusion**

Comparing these two longitudinal databases shows that, in New South Wales, women’s movement protest activity and institution-building peaked at approximately the same times. While fewer institutions were created after the downturn in protest activity, the majority of institutions have survived this downturn. This suggests that the dynamics between these two elements of social movement activity are more complex than the literature assumes. In some areas at least, institutions and protests seem to be mutually sustaining. At a minimum, institutional support may help to garner greater media visibility for ‘outsider’ events. This comparison also supports activists’ accounts of some institutions as being important sites where feminist identities are affirmed, and discursive activism is furthered. We do not claim that these are the only dynamics - just that, as we study social movements, we need to be alert to these possibilities, rather than seeing institutions as inevitably static or conservative.

**References**


