ABSTRACT

FEMINIST MOVEMENTS AS ‘POLITICAL FIELDS’

Solveig Bergman, Department of Sociology, Åbo Akademi University, Finland

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The findings of a project I recently completed on feminist movements in Finland and West Germany during the 1970s and 1980s suggest that feminism can be interpreted both as protest behaviour and as political participation. In this paper I focus on the interplay between ‘old’ and ‘new’, ‘political’ and ‘cultural’, ‘institutional’ and ‘non-institutional’ patterns of action. Often the division between social movements and the formal political sphere is too sharply drawn in movement research. It is not always theoretically useful to distinguish social movements from more conventional types of political action. In addition, movement ‘spill-over’ effects have largely been underplayed in the literature. Pre-existing networks, organisational ties and coalition politics may have powerful effects on the movements. Feminist movements exist in a specific space or ‘political field’ inhabited and circumscribed by other movements as well as by political institutions and organisations, including the state. The goals, rhetoric, actions, organisation forms and strategies of the movements have to be examined in this context. Thus the movement is never fully ‘autonomous’. For example, the decision by feminists whether to organise outside or within existing political organisation and the effects of the chosen type of organising can only be assessed within the contexts of the specific field. My paper analyses the interaction within the political field in order to understand feminist movements’ external opportunity structures, choice of political strategies and framing of discourses. Feminist scholarship has sought to blur traditional dichotomies (e.g., nature-culture; public-private). Yet these efforts have often resulted in new dichotomies that are currently the focus for deconstruction (e.g., sex-gender; equality-difference). I suggest in this paper that autonomy-integration or outside-inside organising with respect of movement strategies is one such dichotomy in need of reassessment.