Social Movements and the Limits of Strategy

How Australian Feminists Formed Positions on Work and Care

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own independent research and that all authorities and sources used are duly acknowledged.

Merrindahl Andrew
26 September 2008
Acknowledgements

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This thesis incorporates material that has been published in the following sole-authored papers:


Abstract

Feminism is often blamed for having made the “wrong decisions” on issues such as work and care. This thesis argues that such judgements are based on a misperception of how social movements exercise collective agency. While feminist historiography and social movement studies offer some insights, neither directly address the question of to what extent the directions taken by social movements can be shaped by high level strategic decision-making. In answering this question, the research was informed by philosophical pragmatism and by feminist theories of responsibility and reason. The prevailing “movement CEO” image of decision-making was rejected in favour of an approach directed to interpreting the past actions of the women’s movement without neglecting its decentralised and collective nature.

I began by investigating the degree of strategy in Australian women’s movement activism on work and care issues in two periods: the interwar years (1919–1938) and in the 1970s and 1980s. These periods were chosen because they are often taken to illustrate failures in feminist decision-making. The second-wave movement is said to have failed women by over-emphasising access to paid work at the expense of women’s caring roles while the feminists of the early twentieth century are said to have locked women into mothering roles by relying on maternalist arguments. The historical research drew on primary sources including the records created by organisations and individuals involved in the movement, together with oral history interviews. The historical studies found little evidence of capacity for, or orientation towards, high level strategic decision-making in terms of the political and discursive risks identified in later criticisms of feminism. The studies supplement existing historical accounts by illuminating the nature of organisational processes within the movement and the reasoning used by participants.

I then developed a positive alternative to existing rational actor models of decision-making, which avoids the assumption that movements as such engage in strategic decision-making but still allows for the possibility of purposive collective action. This “organisation-direction” model proposes that collective intentions may be formed in the more densely-organised nodes of a movement field and may pull the
movement in certain directions without imposing high-level strategic decisions. Non-instrumental elements such as emotion and movement knowledge are irreducible parts of reasoned action, which only sometimes involves assessing risks and opportunities. Movement goals and means are generated in the course of practical engagement rather than through a linear process of decision-making. The thesis contributes to the social movement literature that emphasises the constitutive role of non-instrumental elements of action by showing how these are linked to goal-oriented organisation. The thesis responds to the growing emphasis on strategic choices in social movements by exploring the nature and limits of strategy instead of assuming its usefulness as an interpretive device.
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Abbreviations

AFWV  Australian Federation of Women Voters
AGPS  Australian Government Printing Service
ALP   Australian Labor Party
ANAC  Australian National Advisory Council for International Women’s Year
ANU   Australian National University
AWAP  Australian Women’s Archives Project
AWNL  Australian Women’s National League
BL SLWA Battye Library, State Library of Western Australia
CAEP  Council of Action for Equal Pay
CAR   Commonwealth Arbitration Report
CEO   Chief Executive Officer
DPMC Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
HREOC Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
IAW   International Alliance of Women
ICW   International Council of Women
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IWSA</td>
<td>International Woman Suffrage Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>IWY</td>
<td>International Women’s Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ML SLNSW</td>
<td>Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales</td>
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<tr>
<td>MU</td>
<td>Mothers’ Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCW</td>
<td>National Council(s) of Women</td>
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<td>NFAW</td>
<td>National Foundation for Australian Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-government organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NLA</td>
<td>National Library of Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
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<td>Qld</td>
<td>Queensland</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCBW</td>
<td>Royal Commission on the Basic Wage</td>
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<td>RCCE</td>
<td>Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances</td>
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<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>South Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMO</td>
<td>social movement organisation</td>
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<td>SLV</td>
<td>State Library of Victoria</td>
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<td>UA</td>
<td>United Associations of Women</td>
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<td>Vic.</td>
<td>Victoria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>WCTU</td>
<td>Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Australasia</td>
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<tr>
<td>WEL</td>
<td>Women’s Electoral Lobby</td>
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<tr>
<td>WSG</td>
<td>Women’s Service Guilds of Western Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>YWCA</td>
<td>Young Women’s Christian Association</td>
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