The unobtrusive action of femocrats

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Lee Ann Banaszak examines the case of the 'feminist insiders' who fought for the feminist cause both inside and outside the American state. Her study questions the assumption that protest activism always regards the state as a target.

Reviewed: Lee Ann Banaszak, The Women's Movement: Inside and Outside the State, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 247 p.

Lee Ann Banaszak is professor of Political Science at Penn state University and is well-known to women's movements specialists and more generally, to social movements theorists.[1] In this book, she looks at those she describes as 'feminist insiders', women who have held high positions in the American federal administration system since the 1960's, and who have fought for women's causes both from inside and outside the state. She also presents a new perspective on the history of the women's movement in the United States, using an original empirical study based on around forty interviews with 'feminist insiders' and a body of organizations and personal archives. Lee Ann Banaszak's text, which is about more than just the women's movement, offers an important contribution to social movements theory by questioning its dominant dichotomies, such as insider vs. outsider, conventional vs. confrontational repertoire, and institutionalisation vs. radicalisation.

Social movements research generally assumes, whether implicitly or explicitly, that the state is the main target and/or adversary of social movements.[2] When members of a social

[1] She co-authored, along with Karen Beckwith and Dieter Rucht, an important piece of work on the relationship between social movements and institutions: *Women's Movements Facing the Reconfigured State*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

[2] See Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, New York, Cambridge University

movement have been integrated within institutions, this has traditionally been seen as a sign of the movement's success,[3] but also as a sign of the 'deradicalization of [its] goals' (p. 15).

Research on contemporary women's movements is particularly prone to revert back to this prevalent view; for the last twenty years, a rich body of literature has shown that feminist dissent can flourish from *within* institutions, and that there is a *continuum* of protest spreading from the inside to outside institutions. 'State feminism' scholarship, which views bureaucracy as a complex institutional system interwoven with internal tensions, has highlighted the potentially combative dimension of action carried out by state representatives who are in charge of promoting the status of women, and the sometimes militant identity of the 'femocrats' (neologism formed from 'bureaucrat' and 'feminist') who work within the system.[4]

While her study does in part build on this body of research, Banaszak nevertheless wishes to draw all its theoretical consequences; according to her, the rigid division between movement and state has been insufficiently questioned. Drawing on an insight initially put forward by the sociologist Mary Katzenstein in her work on feminist protests within the Catholic church and the United states military,[5] Banaszak challenges the automatic association that is usually made between "location", "tactics" and "goals" of protest; "the term 'insider' is often used loosely to delineate not just location inside the state, but a combination of conventional tactics and goals of limited reform." (p. 11) She argues that feminists promoting women's movements goals from high-level positions inside the state might be accorded the 'status of outsider' because "*exclusion* from the polity is not completely synonymous with *location*." (p. 8) While working in and for the state, they have been able to radically challenge gender inequality, including – and perhaps even most significantly – that which was to be found deep within the discourse and policies of the state itself. These feminist insiders form a 'movement-state intersection', defined as "a network of movement actors or organizations

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Press, 2001. For a lively criticism of this theoretical perspective, see Olivier Fillieule, « De l'objet de la définition à la définition de l'objet. De quoi traite finalement la sociologie des mouvements sociaux ? », *Politique et Société*, vol.28, n°1, 2009, pp. 15-26.

[3] William Gamson distinguishes between two criteria to measure the success of social movements: the integration of its members (acceptance) and of its demands (new advantages). See William A. Gamson, *The strategy of social protest*, Belmont, Calif., Wadsworth Pub, 1990 [1975].

[4] See Stetson, Dorothy Mcbride and Mazur, Amy G. (eds.) (1995), *Comparative State Feminism*, Thousand Oaks, Sage; Revillard, Anne (2007), *La cause des femmes dans l'État: une comparaison France-Québec* (1965-2007), Sociology doctorate thesis, ENS Cachan.

[5] Mary F. Katzenstein, *Faithful and Fearless. Moving from Feminist Protest Inside the Church and the Military*,

[that] is located within the state" (p. 8). This intersection is not an 'ally' of the movement inside the state, nor is it a part of the bureaucracy partially 'captured' by outside social demands. The movement-state intersection is an *integral part* of the women's movement. In the seven chapters that follow, Banaszak shows how this network of feminist activists inside the state has played an active role in the development of organisational forms, tactics, and goals of the American women's movement since its revival in the 1960's.

Institutionalisation at the Source of the Movement

By taking the idea of a movement-state intersection seriously, Banaszak overturns the traditional view held in research on the institutionalisation of social movements, which generally envisions the latter as a government *response* to pressure from the movement.[6] She shows instead that the actions of a small network of feminist bureaucrats contributed to the development of the 'new' women's movement in the 1960's. From the Second World War on, a handful of women gained access to high-level positions within the American bureaucracy. These women bonded together, particularly as they spent time together at various, often professional, women's associations, which were created during the era of the 'first wave' of the women's movement, in the first half of the twentieth century. The creation of the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women (in 1961), in which several of them participated, contributed to enhancing their mutual ties and to strengthening a 'feminist conscience' amongst them. From the middle of the 1960's onwards, a new field of activism opened up for them with the creation of civil rights legislation and the different agencies responsible for its implementation (in particular, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission – EEOC.) These 'feminist insiders' engaged in an intense effort to ensure that the legislation against gender discrimination be implemented in practice. While this legislation was included in Title VII of the 1964 law on civil rights, its implementation encountered resistances because of the existence of 'protective' legislations for women which, since the start of the twentieth century, had set aside special conditions for workers based on maternal status. Banaszak finds that the activism of these feminist bureaucrats, as well as the resources that they had access to due to their insider position (information, network, material means…) played a crucial role in the initial development of NOW (National Organization for Women), the main 'liberal' feminist organisation of the second wave, created in 1966. At the same time,

Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998.

these feminist insiders – whose majority were trained as lawyers – became involved in cause lawyering;[7] they discreetly initiated and supported the first cases against sexual discrimination presented to the EEOC. Thus, through almost invisible work, they were able to actively contribute to the creation of a 'new' feminist movement, and to the legal, political and social recognition of the paradigm of gender equality.

Location, tactics and the end to protest

Close analysis of the militant feminists' discourse and policies inside the state contradicts another widespread assumption on the institutionalisation of social movements; the idea that members of the movement who successfully penetrate into institution circles will necessarily be more moderate and use more conventional means of protest, as well as be more limited in their protest goals, either because this type of professional position is deemed to attract this type of political profile, or because such preferences are seen as an automatic result of joining a bureaucratic environment.

The forty women studied by Banaszak are, as might be expected from their high-level positions in federal government, socially 'over selected' compared to women in general and to women's movement's activists in particular. They are often white, middle and upper class, older and better educated. The majority claim to endorse liberal feminism, and a number of them stem from what sociologist Jo Freeman has called the 'older branch' of the second wave women's movement, as opposed to the 'younger branch,' made up of students of the New Left who subscribe to a more radical agenda.[8]

However, in-depth interviews suggest that the reformist credentials of these feminist bureaucrats may be taken in a new light. A third of those surveyed (p. 76) define themselves as 'seeking radical change' and view oppression based on gender as systematic and intertwined with other power relationships, such as class and race. Banaszak shows in particular how the intermediary position of these women as brokers between the movement and the state gives them the power to strategically arbitrate between conventional means of action and more

[6] Stetson and Mazur (eds.) *Comparative State Feminism*…, op. cit.
[7] Austin Sarat, Stuart A. Scheingold, (eds.), *Cause lawyers and social movements*, Stanford, CA, Stanford Law and Politics, 2006.
[8] Jo Freeman, '*The Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement*,' American Journal of Sociology, vol.78, n°4, 1973.

confrontational tactics, between action inside or action outside the state. These bureaucrats are not portrayed as necessary loyal to a liberal, strictly reformist agenda; they rather oscillate, pragmatically, between several modes of action according to the context and their perception of the situation. Banaszak concludes that the distinction between reformism and radicalism must be considered as a continuum rather than as a sharp dichotomy.

Thus, being part of the bureaucracy does not necessarily lead to adopting the gender views that prevail in political and bureaucratic spheres. Protest activism can take place from inside the state. If it is invisible, that is often because it is carried out 'under the radar.' It is particularly striking when the administration is openly hostile to the feminist agenda. For example, during the Reagan administration, which was characterised by open attacks on the right to abortion and professional equality, some of these bureaucrats maintained their feminist activism by using a wide range of tactics to escape the watchful gaze of their political guardianship. They temporarily put aside certain agendas in order to be able to focus their militant energy on other areas of feminist politics that were less closely surveyed or less controversial. They would use guile to reconcile professional loyalty with their political objectives. Banaszak shows that through their expertise, and behind the mask of neutrality, these bureaucrats were in some instances able to offer feminist organisations the discursive resources to defeat the politics that they were officially expected to defend.[9]

Movement Bureaucrats or Militant Institutions?

Banaszak's work opens up stimulating research perspectives as much for women's movements specialists as it does for social movements theorists. However, if her aim is to explore the overlap between movements and institutions, it seems to me that the 'movement-state intersection' definition that she gives remains open to debate. The focus she places on a network of activists spread throughout the state is without doubt an essential key part of the analysis, as it allows us to identify the objective (social characteristics, careers) and subjective (discourse and perceptions) continuities between the women's movement and a specific fraction of the bureaucracy, beyond the realm of the institutions officially responsible for

[9] Anne Revillard has examined in close detail the use of 'critical expertise' (« *l'expertise critique* ») in feminist protest inside the French state (« L'expertise critique, force d'une institution faible? Le Comité du travail féminin et la genèse d'une politique d'égalité professionnelle en France (1965-1983) », *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 59, n°2, 2009).

promoting women's rights. However, by arguing that the focus placed on individual activists is the best way to understand the movement-state intersection (Chapter 1), Banaszak brushes aside a bit too quickly the heuristic interest of an *institutional approach*. Several studies have shown that women's policy agencies can be considered to be *militant* institutions and not simply institutions supported *by* militants.[10] To use Katzenstein's terms, these institutions can be seen as 'organizational habitats' within the state, in which the 'organizing for institutional change can originate.'[11] Even if they are torn between an allegiance to the movement and their adherence to the norms of bureaucracy, even if they are often 'policy ghettos' located at the margins of the state (and precisely in part for this reason), women's policy agencies provide an organisational and discursive framework able to support and to legitimise feminist protest within the state, and allow militant discourse and practice to circulate from inside to outside the state. During periods of women's movement's decline 'on the streets', these institutions might serve as 'abeyance structures', to take Verta Taylor's terms. They provide an organisational and cultural environment favourable for maintaining feminist networks, knowledge, and tactics, which thus 'pass' from one wave of feminist mobilisation to another.[12] With regards to the case of the United States studied by Banaszak, it would be interesting to examine the role played by women's policy agencies within the federal administration in maintaining a *network* of feminist bureaucrats, as well as in legitimizing a feminist *culture* both inside and outside the state from the 1960's up until the present day, despite the fluctuations in levels of activism and political tolerance of feminism.

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[10] See Mary F. Katzenstein, *Faithful and Fearless*…, op.cit ; Anne Revillard, *La cause des femmes dans l'État…,* op.cit.
[11] Mary F. Katzenstein, « *Stepsisters: Feminist Movement Activism in Different Institutional Spaces* », in D. S. Meyer et S. Tarrow (eds.), The Social Movement Society, Rowman and Littlefield, 1998, p. 197.
[12] Verta Taylor, « *La continuité des mouvements sociaux. La mise en veille du mouvement des femmes* », in Olivier Fillieule (dir.), *Le désengagement militant*, Paris, Belin, 2005 [1989] (Fr. translation by O. Fillieule); Suzanne Staggenborg, '*Social Movement Communities and Cycles of Protest: The Emergence and Maintenance of a Local Women's Movement*,' Social Problems, vol.45, n°2, 1998