What has happened to the Women’s Movement?:
Organisational Dynamics and Trajectories of Feminist Organisations in Milan and Berlin

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Abstract

Although beginning from the more general question “What has happened to the women’s movement?”, the more precise research questions this thesis addresses are: “how and why do feminist organisations style their organisations in the way they do?” and “what are the dynamics that guide organisational transformation and change?”. In order to answer these questions, the thesis relies on the theoretical tools provided by social movement research. More specifically, it refers to the emerging branch of literature called the “cognate area”, in which concepts borrowed from traditional approaches to social movements are revisited and combined in order to take into account the effects of cultural and structural, interpretative and material factors in triggering, shaping and transforming mobilization. Such an approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to better consider the great variety of organisational forms which marks women’s movement organisations which has in turn, in some respects, made it an “awkward” movement to study for scholars of social movements. Methodologically, the thesis takes a comparative approach to investigating the trajectory of the women’s movement in two countries: Germany and Italy. Considering that feminist activism is traditionally rooted at the local level, the empirical research focuses, through the triangulation of interviews, participant observation and document analysis, on two urban contexts: Berlin and Milan. The thesis recognizes the great importance of past organisational experiences for WMOs. Accordingly, following two chapters dedicated respectively to theoretical approaches and the definition of the women’s movement and WMOs, as well as methodology, the third chapter of the thesis describes in detail the path of WMOs in the two cities - from the 1960s until 2000. The final part of the chapter highlights historical similarities and differences. Finally, the last two chapters and the conclusions focus on the empirical research, showing how different political opportunity structures, traditions of mobilization, organizational repertoires, material opportunities and ideological legacies all concurred in shaping different “multi-organisational fields” on women’s issues and thus different organisational choices for single WMOs. The greater dependence of Berlin WMOs on public funding, their greater degree of professionalization and formalization, as well as their greater isolation from potential political allies are all factors that largely
influence their goals and functioning. In Milan organizations are conditioned by a lower level of professionalization, relative financial independence, the presence of double militants who act as bridges with other political organisations in the broader area of the Left, and by a greater reliance on (different) feminist theoretical approaches in choosing and organizing goals and activities.

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