Introduction

A Success without Impact?
Case Studies from the Women’s Liberation Movements in Europe

Kristina Schulz

Historians have underlined feminism’s diversity and richness. What feminism was, and is, has been subjected to an ongoing debate, not only for activists but also for scholarship. Twenty-five years ago, Denise Riley suggested that “woman” is an “unstable category” and that “feminism” is the site of the systematic fighting that resulted out of that instability.”¹ Others, like Karen Offen, have given a more concrete definition of feminism as a “system of ideas on its own rights”² and a movement “for sociopolitical change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women’s subordination within a given society.”³ More recent scholarship has taken to understand feminism as a historical category, trying to work on its historically specific occurrences.⁴ There is a large consensus about the assumption that there is not a singular “feminism” but, rather, that it should be thought of in terms of differently “situated feminist experiences.”⁵ Still, how heterogeneous feminist experiences might be best analyzed with regard to the issue of impact is open to question.

This book is about a very specific moment in the long history of feminism: the women’s liberation movements (WLM). In Europe, the organization of women willing to struggle for women’s rights first came together in the second half of the nineteenth century. Those who survived the genocide and total war of the twentieth century received a strong, and not always welcome, stimulus from the new and more radical feminist groups that developed within the very different context of the New Left at the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s. These new groups differed substantially from the older women’s movements, which were not, as many “new” feminists used to think, necessarily limited to the struggle for suffrage only but were also focused on access to education, paid work, and, for a minority, sexual/reproductive issues, all sometimes in militant ways not unlike the WLMs in
the 1970s. But the newer movements, to a much larger extent, employed unconventional protest forms and organized through informal networks rather than through official membership. Of course, to a certain degree the women’s liberation movements were organized. As an internal process that regulates the interrelations of individuals in a collective action pattern, organization is part of every social movement. In addition, social movements can embrace established organizations, often working with progressive elements in socialist parties, or trade unions. But those established groups were not crucial for the specific dynamic of interaction that emerged after 1968. During the early 1970s, in most European countries radical feminists were the driving force in the formation of social movements that – following the example of the United States – were named the women’s liberation movement, Mouvement de libération des femmes, Frauenbefreiungsbewegung, or used adjectives like “radical,” “feminist,” or “new” (movimiento feminista, Neue Frauenbewegung) in order to distance themselves from older “bourgeois” women’s organizations.

Without losing sight of the broader history of feminism in which the WLMs are situated, this book concentrates on the 1970s and 1980s. All the authors are concerned – in very different ways – with the impact that the movements made to the legal, political, and cultural conditions of advanced industrial societies. Of all the social movements that resulted from the political upheavals around 1968, the WLM have been one of the most lasting and visible. The struggle of the movements for women’s liberation and autonomy, gender equality policies, reproductive rights, and protection against male violence has been crucial. By increasing its activist base and building alliances with other social groups and organizations, feminism has become an essential part of political culture in many parts of the world. One can therefore say that its strategy of mobilization has been successful. But beyond that, can it also claim to have achieved long-term results? Or was it, to borrow the words of one of the most famous journalists of the Weimar Republic, Kurt Tucholsky (1890–1935), a “success without impact”?6 Scholars from diverse national and disciplinary backgrounds have pooled their knowledge on post-1968 feminist activism from a European perspective and have attempted a collective assessment in this book. As experts on specific areas of society and on specific national contexts, they evaluate in this volume the impact and outcomes of feminist activism of the 1970s and 1980s.

As Myra Marx Ferree’s works on Germany in a global perspective show, the variations of feminism in different countries and contexts can inform us about very general patterns of feminist activism when studied in a systematic way. From here our collective enterprise concentrates on the WLM as a point of departure, understanding them as social movements that, in most of the
countries examined here, emerged in the wake of the upheavals of the late 1960s and, after a period of growing public visibility – both in terms of its numbers and prominence in setting national political agendas – transformed over the course of the 1980s, giving way to a multiplicity of networks, associations, institutions, and politicized milieus.

Two distinct – though connected – modes of analysis of the history of feminism and social movements have informed our reflections on impact, all of which ask different questions and draw on different methodological and analytical frameworks.

The first of these approaches is concerned with finding out what precisely feminism is or was in a specific place and moment. It is the attempt to understand who was included under the umbrella of feminism, what at a certain moment of time was considered to be a “feminist” identity (and what was not), and what was understood to be feminist activism, its priorities, and its strategies. When analyzing the impact of the WLM, this perspective investigates what constituted success in the eyes of movement activists at the time. How did they conceptualize the link between collective protest and social change? From this angle, explorations of feminism examine the hopes, the claims, and the action strategies of collective protest in order to further our understanding of the ways that movement activists saw themselves as historical subjects of change, and of their chances to realize their political dreams. What were the expectations of those who engaged with feminism? Within this historicizing approach, reflecting on different notions of “success” can help us to explore the diversity of rival ideas and struggles within a given movement and to investigate how these structured the collective, as well as to identify changes in the goals of a movement and the strategies employed in achieving them. It is to investigate what British feminist activist Sheila Rowbotham called in 1971 the process of “finding a voice.”

This investigation takes us into the collective imaginary of the movement, to its modes of perception, value systems, and – maybe – collective myths. However, this approach avoids assessing the movement’s impact on society. By focusing on expectations, strategies, and self-descriptions, it fails to distinguish between perceptions of success/failure and processes of profound structural change.

The second approach is informed by political and social science and draws on the theories and methodologies of social movement research. With few exceptions, social movement research failed until the late 1990s to elaborate conceptually on the question of effect. But recent reflections on impact and outcome have opened up several new ways of thinking about these important issues. One is to think about the conditions of success. Roland Roth and Dieter Rucht argue that a movement’s success depends on “a com-
plex assembly of factors” or even of a “combination of different assemblies of factors.” On a general level, the authors distinguish between internal and external conditions. Internal conditions refer to the organizational resources and communication capacities of a movement. They are both a condition and a result of the emergence and stabilization of collective identity formation. The external conditions necessary for success are part of the political opportunity structure, and to access them involves some degree of interaction with the establishment. Though questioning the conditions of success is not well suited to examining any divergences in the collective formulation of the movement’s aims, and is also unable to take systematically into account the unintended consequences and effects of social movements, the conceptual differentiation between internal and external conditions needed for success allows us to approach the success or failure of a movement by considering the extent to which movement activists achieved their goals. Still, the question of what is considered to be a legitimate goal is a subject of controversy within social movements and beyond. William Gamson’s distinction between “acceptance” and “advances” helps to differentiate the notion of success, distinguishing between the degree to which a challenging group is accepted as legitimate and the degree to which new advantages can be achieved. Yet, this approach, as well as Paul Schumaker’s classical distinction between different levels of policy responsiveness to protest group demands, among many other considerations on “how movements matter,” concentrate on political demands and thus on the production of legislation. They are helpful for understanding what became of the WLMs’ claim for equal rights and for abortion rights, but they are less suited to assessing other dimensions of feminist activism.

More recent approaches offer additional conceptualization to the study of social movement impact. Integrating classifications of movement outcomes, Marco Giugni and Lorenzo Bosi assign social movement impact to three levels: a political level, which refers to effects on the movement’s political environment; a cultural level, which refers to effects on ways of understanding the world, on opinions and values; a biographical level, which refers to effects on life-course patterns and to the personal costs and benefits of movement activism. Furthermore, they suggest combining those levels through distinguishing between internal and external impacts. “Internal impacts refer to changes that occur … within the movement …; external impacts refer to the effect that movements have in their external environment.” By doing so, they identify six main domains “where effects are possible”: first, the power and decision-making structures within a social movement or a movement organization; second, value change within a social movement/movement sector; third, life-course patterns of movement participants; fourth, external policy
change or influence on the process of political decision-making; fifth, effects on public opinion and attitudes; and sixth, change of life-course patterns on an aggregate level.

**Figure 1**

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<th>Internal</th>
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<td>Power relations within a movement</td>
<td>Substantial (policy) Procedural, institutional change</td>
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<td>Value change within a movement</td>
<td>Public opinion and attitude</td>
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<td>Life-course patterns of movement participants</td>
<td>Aggregate-level life-course patterns</td>
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It is debatable whether this classification is suited to integrative analysis of all the effects of movement activism. Where would we find the influence that Lucy Delap discusses in her chapter of the effect of feminism on the British men’s movement? What about the challenge of categories such as class or race, thoroughly analyzed for the Italian case by Marica Tolomelli and Anna Frisone in this volume? However, such a framework can direct our attention to some crucial areas. To distinguish on an analytical level between possible areas of influence is fundamental to being able to undertake a differentiated analysis. Indeed, without it, the first and the second section of this volume, dealing as they do with different aspects of political and cultural outcomes, would not be possible. But this approach offers no more than a starting point for thinking about the impact of the WLM. It does not take into account that the meaning itself of what was to be considered as “political” or “cultural” was in flux around 1968. In particular, the category of the “political” was the subject of intense debate in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and was particularly fought over in and by the WLM that claimed “the personal” to be “political.” Furthermore, Giugni and Bosi’s classification does not take into consideration the fact that social movements can hardly control the directions taken by the processes they trigger. Depending on contextual factors – such as political opportunities or cultures of protest – they develop their own dynamics. Protest activities may have unintended consequences. Moreover, in order to be heard, social movements need mediators – such as intermediary organizations, parties, unions, or initiative groups – to translate their objectives into politically enforceable demands. In this process of mediation, such objectives may change or even be exploited for other purposes. Such multicausal correlations render the identification of social movement impacts a complex matter. A historical
understanding of the impact of social movements, recognized as the result of
diverse, uncontrolled, and open processes, therefore might provide a more
detailed and source-based account of the struggles, campaigns, institutional
responses, and negotiation processes between the actors involved in different
social arenas.

Against this backdrop, no decision has been taken in advance on the
concepts to employ in this anthology in order to describe social and political
change induced by the various groups fighting for women’s liberation. To
political scientists, this might sound odd, as multiple distinctions have been
discussed in social movement research, such as that between “impact” and
“outcome” put forward by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow. But this volume
is about very diverse movement dynamics, issues, forms, and expressions of
collective action in different national settings. If any, the distinction that was
binding for all chapters assembled in this volume was that between success in
terms of mobilization or immediate satisfaction of concrete demands on the
one hand, and multi-dimensional long-term effects on the other hand.

Arguing that the end of the protest cycle that started in many European
countries in the aftermath of the social upheavals of the late 1960s was not
the “death” of feminism (as neither was the formation period of the WLM
in the late 1960s and early 1970s its “birth”), the chapters collected in this
volume try to look at the traces that these social movements have left in
different European societies – both on the continent and on the British Isles
– as well as, for comparative purposes, in the United States.

From here it is useful for us to think about the ways in which social
movements end. Social movement research has identified three broad possi-
bilities: transformation into a subsequent social movement, dissolution, or
institutionalization. In view of the afterlife of the 1968 protest movement
in many Western countries, we might add the possibility of countercultural
retreat and terrorist networks. But how do we know in our empirical work
that a movement has come to its end? In some cases the answer is clear; for
example, when movement activity is reduced to institutional acting. Yet what
about when less tangible elements of a movement still exist, such as in sub-
cultures or informal supraregional networks? It seems difficult to determine
a definite endpoint of the movement when it comes to women’s liberation.

Charles Tilly argues for a more differentiated conceptual approach. He
does not discuss the “end” of a social movement but instead suggests the
notion of a “future trajectory.” According to Tilly, we have to distinguish a
number of possible future trajectories for social movements, ranging from
extinction through contraction to expansion and institutionalization, and
a number of different scales, going from the local through to the regional,
national, international, and the global. While undertaking a historical ex-
amination of the WLM, it is also worthwhile to utilize a flexible understanding of the concept of “movement” to take into account not only times of obvious formation and mobilization but also what comes after these extraordinarily dynamic periods. How did the mode of organization of women’s liberation groups change over time? What became of consciousness-raising groups, and what of the first informal and extracurricular women’s studies courses in universities? What of single-issue organizations such as the Aktion 218 (§ 218 is the paragraph regulating abortion in the criminal code of the Federal Republic of Germany)? Examining the trajectory of expansion and institutionalization, for example, may help us sketch the trajectories of the informal self-help health groups of the 1970s that became institutionalized and accredited health centers by the 1980s and 1990s. Likewise, when analyzing changes of scale, examining the trajectory of young activists from the first days of a WLM group to becoming women’s rights advocates in international organizations at the end of the century may be useful.

Based on Tilly’s distinction, two contradictory types of trajectories can be seen in the WLM: contraction and expansion. These were first noticeable with regard to institutionalization processes, be it into contraction in the form of counterinstitutions, such as women’s or health centers, or into expansion through entering the institutions of the establishment, such as professional women’s representatives like equal opportunity offices or parliament. Second, contraction and expansion also mirrored the cultural forms of the movement, be it contraction into a distinct counterculture or successive expansion into the mainstream culture. And, third, we can discuss contraction and expansion in relation to the geographical characteristics of a movement that has become increasingly embedded on a local level, but that at the same time has expanded enormously on an international, even global, level. To examine processes of expansion and contraction adds a historical dimension to the question of external and internal mobilization. Whereas the notion of “internal” and “external” mobilization processes suggests that the borders of social movements are clearly defined – which historically is true in some moments and not in others – “expansion” and “contraction” point more to the fluid character of a social movement.

Expansion and contraction are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, if we assume the fundamental openness of processes of social change, historical analysis must concentrate on such parallel, overlaying, and sometimes contradictory developments. Several examples in this volume show that the WLM’s strategies of outreach did not always make it more accessible for certain social groups and individuals. Producing a journal in order to mobilize women outside the movement, for example, could also unwittingly exclude those who did not have the language skills or the time to participate.
Ironically, attempts at widening the social base of women’s liberation could therefore actually exacerbate the exclusion of such groups from feminism.

Whereas “contraction” and “expansion” can provide us with useful ways of thinking about the history of the women’s movement, they do not reduce the complexity of the analysis of its effects and outcomes. This is not only because of the prolonged period of investigation but also because, from the 1980s onwards, the WLM became part of a new social, political, and ethical configuration of society that Nancy Fraser has identified as a neoliberal variant of capitalism. In her article “Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” Fraser asks the uncomfortable question of whether, by accentuating female autonomy and individuality, the WLM has “unwittingly supplied a key ingredient of what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello called the ‘New spirit of capitalism.’” Whether or not we agree with this diagnosis – and with regard to the European scene we might not totally agree – it brings us back to the necessity of making clear distinctions between the intended and unintended consequences of social movements. Even in the national context of one of the countries most committed to the idea of political liberalism – the United States – women’s liberation has never been a project reduced to mere economic considerations, nor has “liberation” been reduced to participation in the labor force.

Many of the case studies presented in this volume deal with the tension between processes of contraction and expansion, present in any analysis of the impact of the WLM. The first section explores whether and to what extent the movement successfully changed institutions and how its claims have been echoed in public, political, and academic institutions. Given that such processes of expansion were anything but inevitable, the contributors identify the actors, reconstruct negotiations, and consider strategic compromises. The authors explore such questions in national contexts and shed light on different arenas, such as the WLM’s position on the legislation regarding abortion and reproductive technology (Leena Schmitter) and gender equality (Sarah Kiani) in Switzerland, or the influence of feminist theory and practice on academia in West Germany and the United States (Stefanie Ehmsen).

The second section questions the extent of the feminist (counter)culture’s advances. It traces the history of women’s literature and its producers and investigates its relationship to a feminist – as well as to a broader – public. It analyzes the impact that literary texts, their authors, and the literary practices promoting them have on feminist mobilization. Did feminist (counter)culture contribute to the contraction and/or expansion of the movement? Did the production, translation, and diffusion of texts create new possibilities of inventing a feminist self? Sylvie Chaperon explores Simone de Beauvoir’s role in the French Mouvement de libération des femmes,
impressively rebutting the assumption that feminists of different status, age, experience, and habitus were not able to collaborate. My own chapter on women and words examines the function that literary practices had within and beyond the WLM in Switzerland, whereas Ana Martins takes a critical look at relations of domination and subordination in what she calls the “second-wave community” by exploring processes of (non)circulation, and (non)canonization, and the selective appropriation of feminist texts from the margins of Europe. Finally Christa Binswanger and Kathy Davis’s re-reading of two “feminist” bestsellers, which, at different moments of time, deal with women’s sexuality, delineates the essential role of sexuality in women’s self-definition and its commitment to feminism.

The third section examines controversies within feminism and the complex ways in which WLMs were entwined with parallel movements such as the workers’ or the men’s movement. These issues are present elsewhere in the book, but here they are analyzed more systematically. How did activists deal with ethnic and social differences? If we understand the WLM as a social movement, i.e. as a collective actor who acts on the basis of a collective identity, then we must examine how this collective identity was produced and how these processes also resulted in certain social groups being excluded from the movement. Against this background, Christine Bard’s chapter explores the relationship between the WLM, lesbianism, and an increasingly distinct lesbian movement in France. Marica Tolomelli and Anna Frisone analyze the theoretical and strategic challenges women’s liberation had to face in Italy when confronted with issues of class. Natalie Thomlinson’s chapter explores multiracial collectives in Britain, and Lucy Delap reminds us that, again in Britain, women’s liberation was, in the very first phase of the movement, closely tied to men’s liberation, and that a number of men were engaged in supporting feminist activities.

The fourth section takes a closer look at the transnational dimension of women’s liberation by investigating the relationship between French and Russian feminists (Kirsten Harting’s chapter) and exploring the possibilities and challenges of feminism in cyberspace (Johanna Niesyto’s chapter). These two contributions suggest that the history of women’s liberation – as a social movement that acts on a national level but that has always had a strong transnational focus – cannot be written within the confines of “methodological nationalism.”

The last section of the book is concerned with methodological questions. That movement impact is difficult to assess has become a commonplace; indeed, this introduction supports rather than refutes this thesis. Yet we need to address these analytical problems in a more concrete way in order to establish which approaches may or may not help us to assess impact more usefully.
Thus, Margaretta Jolly argues that oral history can witness feminist cultural influence that goes beyond the more measurable aspects of campaigns. Elisabeth Elgán’s chapter underlines the discrepancies we might find between oral and written history, and it warns us of the pitfalls of both romantic glamorization or subsequent condemnation when either nostalgia or frustration interfere with memory. Karen Offen’s contribution on the long-term perspective closes the collection by situating the WLM within the long and fascinating history of feminism.

I am grateful to a number of people and institutions that helped with this book. The Swiss National Scientific Foundation funded a conference on the subject at the University of Bern in 2012. It was the beginning of a collective dialogue that continues. Magda Kaspar was irreplaceable in preparing the different manuscripts for press. I also thank Natalie Thomlinson for her willingness and her invaluable competence in rereading many texts of non-native English speakers. Martin Klimke encouraged me several times to bring the book project to an end, and not to make it a fast book but an interesting and – hopefully – good one. I thank him as well as Joachim Scharloth and Kathrin Fahlenbrach (not to forget Marion Berghahn), for accepting this volume in Berghahn’s Protest, Culture and Society series. I owe a lot to them and to the Marie Curie Conference and Training Course “European Protest Movements since the Cold War” that they organized between 2006 and 2010. I also would like to thank the Sozialarchiv in Zurich for providing us the fantastic image now on the cover of this book. It was probably taken in the mid-eighties during a happening called “Die Schaumschlägerinnen” (the egg beaters). Elisabeth Joris was so kind to make some enquiries about the event and the persons involved. Last but not least I am very grateful to Lucy Delap who has been a constant source of knowledge and encouragement in helping this book to appear.

This collection is dedicated to Brigitte Schnegg (1953–2014), pioneer of gender studies in Switzerland. A historian by formation and by conviction, she was also involved in today’s feminist campaigns and thinking. She was an irreplaceable source of ideas, confidence, and energy for so many people and projects concerned with gender, its historicity, and its impact. She also cared for this project. In the midst of our discussions about the conclusion for this book, she passed away. We will have to do without her, but not without commemorating her first.

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Notes

3. Ibid., 151.


20. Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review* 56 (2009): 98. Nancy Fraser states that “the cultural changes jumpstarted by the second wave, salutary in themselves, have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society” (99).

21. In contrast to the situation in the United States, for instance, feminist criticism of reproductive technology as a path to female self-determination was very prominent in Europe. Many feminists argued that reproductive technology would undermine the woman’s autonomy and give control to a growing body of (male) experts. From the mid-1980s on, feminist resistance against reproductive engineering was organized on an international level through the creation of FINRRAGE (Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering).


**Bibliography**


