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Changing Orientations and Reappraisal in the 1980s: Abortion, Politics and the Course of Modernity

Introduction

A key question in the field of social movements is, where did the new movements ‘go’ after the 1970s? Nuala Fennell and June Considine speculated in 1981:

Many people feel the question now is, not what has gone wrong with the Women’s Movement, but just how many movements are there? And which of them speaks for the majority of women? Gone, it appears is the comfortable complacency with which most women regarded those groups and individuals involved in the women’s campaign. At a time when we have had a plethora of high level seminars and public meetings on women’s issues, (such activity has in fact not been seen since 1975 International Women’s Year), the groans of discontent from various women indicate that all is not as ideal as it might be. Yet, all the public meetings were packed. Betty Friedan, the mother of Women’s Liberation addressed an audience of 1500 women and men at a Women’s Political Association seminar last December. In November, we heard Ms Lucille Mair of the United Nations and Danish Minister for Culture, Lise Ostegaard, at a Council for the Status of Women weekend. And, this year, around 1000 women packed Liberty Hall for a day of speeches, and discussion at the launching of Status magazine. All the while the other regular meetings relating to women in politics, trade unions or work were happening all over the country. Surely this initiative, debate and publicity must indicate a healthy and vital state of the women’s...
A central contention of this chapter is that the women's movement in Ireland did not 'disappear' from 1980 onwards but, in fact, transformed from within and continued to mobilise in new movement centres. The transformation of the women's movement in this stage of reappraisal is based largely on three dynamics, examined in detail in this chapter:

1. the constraints on the continued expansion of autonomous radicalism within the women's movement particularly manifest in the campaign around the 1983 Abortion Referendum;
2. the challenge of an organised and broad-based counter right movement to previous gains and future success;
3. the intensified mainstreaming and professionalisation of organisations which originated in both the reform and radical sectors of the 1970s and was a purposeful strategy (prompted by a combination of decreasing political opportunities, fewer autonomous mobilisations and the maturation of a network of organisations established in the previous decade).

The gradual interweaving and fusion of both contemporary styles of activism – mainstream and autonomous – had advanced the movement during the 1970s in two distinct parallel sectors, but also laid the foundations for an inclusive, generic mainstreaming process. The women's movement formalised and mainstreamed throughout the 1980s. As a result, feminism itself became an accepted subject of public discourse and actor in political society. A range of new issues emerged in feminist theory in the 1980s (such as, pornography and the reproductive technologies), but the movement as a whole scaled down. A decrease in local radical action occurred in the women's movement in Ireland against a general background of social and economic retrenchment, high unemployment and emigration and, in particular, polarised constitutional referenda on abortion in 1983 and divorce in 1986. Fundamentally, the subject of legal abortion in the context of this general period raises a number of questions about mainstream approaches to the interpretation of social change and Ireland (see O'Carroll, 1991).

What changed in the 1980s?

After the period of intense activity on several fronts in the first stage of advancement, the organisation of a counter right movement,