Engaging with the State: Considering the "Progressive Potential" of Feminist Service Provision

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Abstract

Citing the possibility of co-optation, some activists and scholars argue that feminist organizations should avoid a funding relationship with the state. This article explores the implications of such engagement. I argue that feminist organizations must continue to pressure the state to support the third sector in a meaningful way.

Résumé

Citant la possibilité de la cooptation, certaines activistes et certaines érudites font valoir que les organismes féministes devraient éviter une relation de financement avec l'état. Cet article explore les implications ce genre d'engagement crée. Je soutiens que les organismes féministes doivent continuer à faire des pressions sur l'état pour appuyer le troisième secteur de façon efficace.

Many feminist organizations began as grassroots agencies with close ties to the women's movement. However, feminist service organizations, in particular, have had to adapt throughout the decades and many have become institutionalized. Institutionalization often involves developing stable ties with the state (Martin 1990, 188). This relationship can have some benefits for organizations. For instance, Frederika Schmitt and Patricia Martin (1999, 367) tell us that it can provide a home base for activists and ensure that an organization has both the labour power and the legitimacy to advocate for social justice concerns. Additionally, funding provides stability for the everyday operations of an organization by ensuring that it can pay the bills, purchase supplies and pay staff (Martin 1990, 201; Maxwell 2009, 19; Mencher 1999, 2083).

However, as feminist organizations become institutionalized concerns about co-optation[1] become central. Although resources and opportunities become available to institutionalized organizations, they are often accompanied by limitations and constraints (Schmitt and Martin 1999, 367). Sarah Maxwell (2009, 53) notes that becoming co-opted often results in organizations being placated by governmental institutions. Because of this, many feminists are wary of the strings attached to resources and some argue that feminist organizations should avoid a funding relationship with the state altogether (Durán 2007, 8; Durazo 2007). Durazo, for instance, warns against accepting state funding, and argues that this leads to the "social servicization" of the anti-violence movement (2007, 123). However, others have shown that feminist organizations have responded to institutionalization in a variety of ways and that accepting funding from the state does not necessarily lead to co-optation

(Boucher 2007; English 2007; Martin 2005; Matthews 1995; Schmitt and Martin 1999).

This article explores the implications of state funding for feminist organizations. I begin by conceptualizing feminist service provision as social reproduction and I locate feminist service organizations as part of the broader third sector. Next, I consider the relationship between the third sector and the state and explore how neoliberalism has changed this relationship and the work expected of volunteer organizations. Focusing on Canadian feminist organizations, this article discusses the impact on organizations and personnel in their daily work. In particular, I highlight recent changes to Status of Women Canada (SWC). SWC is a major federal funding source for feminist and women's organizations across the country; thus, analyzing these changes draws our attention to the nature of the current funding regime that feminist organizations operate within. I argue that, in order to appropriately value the work of service provision, feminist organizations must continue to pressure the state to support the third sector. Additionally, because the state continues to download the responsibility for social reproduction onto the voluntary sector, it must support this work in a meaningful way by not only providing adequate and sustainable funding, but also by granting the sector some autonomy.

Feminist Service Provision as Social Reproduction

The services provided by feminist organizations often reflect the work traditionally expected of women in the home. For example, the most basic work in a women's shelter includes housing and feeding women and children who have few or no other social supports. If we understand traditional conceptions of "women's work" broadly as caring work, we can see that much of the work performed in organizations, such as women's health centres, rape crisis centres (RCCs) and battered women's shelters, falls under this category. This is true for many social services in our society. Donna Baines' discussion of social workers highlights the parallel between women's paid and unpaid work lives and she contends that neoliberal

approaches assume that women can continue to absorb disproportionate amounts of this work. Furthermore, given that women are overrepresented in the provision of social services (Baines 2004, 284), understanding feminist service provision and social services more broadly through the lens of social reproduction is helpful and draws our attention to the gendered nature of this work.

Social reproduction has been used by feminists to describe a wide variety of activities (Bezanson 2006, 26); however, it can best be understood as the maintenance and reproduction of people and their labour power (Bezanson and Luxton 2006). Social reproduction is gendered and is disproportionately the responsibility of women; thus, it is largely unrecognized and undervalued (Bezanson 2006, 4). However, this work is necessary in order to perpetuate the economic system; therefore, the state has an interest in social reproduction (2006, 26)

Social reproduction involves many levels. Kate Bezanson and Meg Luxton (2006, 3) tell us that social reproduction as a concept allows us to understand how multiple institutions, including the state, the market, the family/household and the third sector, "...interact and balance power so that the work involved in the daily and generational production and maintenance of people is completed." The state plays an important role in social reproduction, in part, because it creates the context for the work itself (Bezanson 2006, 27). Acting as a mediator, the state can intervene in order to reconcile conflicts between the interdependent systems of capitalist production and social reproduction (Bezanson 2006, 27; Cameron 2006, 46; Luxton 2006, 37; Ursel 1992). For example, it can provide things such as health care services to alleviate some of the burdens of social reproduction from citizens (Bezanson and Luxton 2006, 3-4). However, while the state has the ability to offset the costs of social reproduction, a shift from the welfare state to neoliberalism has meant that it has largely withdrawn from this role (Bezanson 2006).

Marjorie Griffin Cohen and Jane Pulkingham (2009, 16) tell us that neoliberalism involves policies which work to

privatize the public sector, reduce regulations for the private sector, minimize the power of trade unions and redesign government social programs so that they are less costly. Thus, proponents of neoliberalism argue that services provided by the state are expensive, inefficient and they contend that government should have a minimal role in service provision. Instead, individuals are encouraged to go to the market. When they are unable to do so, they are expected to utilize voluntary, familial and community networks (Bezanson 2006; Shields and Evans 1998, 88). While scholars tend to focus on the levels of the state, the market and the family, volunteer associations often play a vital role in social reproduction as well (Luxton 2006, 38).

Feminist organizations provide many important services for women and the community; however, feminists and other social advocates debate the implications of the increasing role of the third sector in service provision. Some question whether these organizations act as a buffer for the state. In other words, do voluntary organizations simply provide cheap services to those "...in the throes of abandonment" by their state (Gilmore 2007, 45; Wolch 1990)? And how much autonomy do these organizations have? Are they able to advocate on behalf of the service users or does their dependency on state resources compromise this?

Neoliberalism and the Third Sector

The third sector[2] is hard to define and includes a wide variety of organizations and associations (Boris 2006, 1-2; Shields and Evans 1998, 89; Wolch 1990, 8-9). Generally, we can say that third sector organizations are not for profit, serve the broader "public interest" and depend heavily on external funding and voluntary labour. Volunteer organizations play a prominent role in the delivery of services to the population (Boris 2006; Shields and Evans 1998). However, they are also frequently tied to broader social movements and are active participants in mobilizing members to articulate social concerns and push for state reforms (Reid 2006, 344). Therefore, these organizations "...often move beyond the direct provision of

services to agitate for changes to existing state and/or employer-based contributions to social reproduction" (Luxton 2006, 38).

With the shift to neoliberalism, a new relationship between the state and the voluntary sector has emerged which has greatly affected the work of volunteer organizations (Baines 2004; Phillips and Levasseur 2004; Shields and Evans 1998; Wolch 1990). As neoliberal discourse emphasizes the need to downsize the public sector and denies its responsibility for services, volunteer organizations are increasingly called upon to deliver services previously provided by the Keynesian welfare state (Baines 2004, 268; Gilmore 2007, 45; Phillips and Levasseur 2004; Shields and Evans1998; Trudeau 2008; Wolch 1990). Instead of actively participating in service delivery, the state sees itself as a contractor, preferring to purchase services rather than provide them (MacDonald 2009; Phillips and Levasseur 2004). While Canadian governments have contracted out for services in the past, during the 1980s and 1990s this became a common strategy for cutting costs, reducing the size of the state and avoiding public-sector unions. However, while third sector organizations continually take on more of the responsibility for service provision, their power and autonomy is severely limited in a contractual relationship with the state (Phillips and Levasseur 2004, 452-4).

Susan Phillips and Karine Levasseur (2004) discuss contradictory trends in Canadian governments' approaches towards the third sector. They argue that Canada is moving towards a more collaborative relationship with the voluntary sector; however, remnants of a previous model of governing remain. In particular, they call attention to two changes made in the relationship between the state and the third sector which have had negative impacts on voluntary organizations. First, the trend towards providing project funding rather than core or operational funding has meant that financial support for the third sector no longer allows for any flexibility or stability (Canada 2005, 2; Phillips and Levasseur 2004). Core funding provides for the everyday running of an organization in addition to supporting

projects. In contrast, project funding focuses on specific program costs and requires evidence of measurable outcomes (Canada 2005, 2; Phillips and Levasseur 2004, 454). Furthermore, project funding is short term and keeps organizations insecure and in constant search for future resources (Canada 2005).

Accompanying these changes to funding, a strict accountability regime characterizes the state's relations with third sector organizations. Accountability is a necessary part of the funding relationship; however, how governments exercise this can differ significantly. While some approaches to accountability allow for learning and improvement, the current accountability regime is rule based and focuses on control over funded projects. In order to be eligible for funding, organizations must now provide thorough details regarding the activities and scheduling of projects. Additionally, they must outline the predicted outcomes of funded programming (Phillips and Levasseur 2004, 454-57). For instance, in order to be eligible for funding through the Women's Program, organizations must prove that their proposed projects are "...feasible and effective in terms of activities, timelines, planned outcomes and potential risks" (Status of Women Canada 2009). In addition to the stringent requirements for eligibility, once an organization has received funding it is heavily monitored (Canada 2005; Phillips and Levasseur 2004, 457).

In contrast to this approach, policy tools have been created by the Voluntary Sector Initiative, in a partnership between the Voluntary Sector Forum and the federal Ministry of Social Development, that acknowledge the contributions of the third sector and seek to create a collaborative relationship with voluntary organizations. The Code of Good Practice for Funding was created to provide a framework for funding policies and practices. It outlines the type of funding that organizations can receive and describes activities which will receive funding (Expert Panel on Accountability Mechanisms for Gender Equality 2006). It also contains a discussion of accountability which emphasizes the need for flexibility and learning. Furthermore, the Code recognizes the need for stability and recommends that the federal government employ multiyear funding arrangements (Phillips and Levasseur 2004, 468). The Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue is meant to enhance communication between the third sector and government and recommends the increased participation of the voluntary sector in the policy process (Expert Panel on Accountability Mechanisms for Gender Equality 2006). These two policy tools recognize the important work and experience of the voluntary sector. They seek to create a more collaborative relationship between voluntary organizations and the Canadian state and encourage an exchange of knowledge. However, their impact is questionable because they are not legally binding and, therefore, are difficult to enforce (Phillips and Levasseur 2004, 467).

Neoliberal regimes thrust increasing responsibility for social reproduction onto the voluntary sector, while also submitting organizations to harsh forms of surveillance (Canada 2005; Phillips and Levasseur 2004). However, in Canada, there has been some recognition of the damage that these practices inflict on volunteer organizations. The following section considers the impacts of current changes to funding and new expectations regarding accountability. In particular, I explore how this funding regime affects the work of organizations and, more specifically, the workers involved in service provision. I employ the case of a Canadian feminist organization and explore the implications of changes made to the mandate of SWC, a source of funds for Canadian women's and feminist organizations. Next, I consider what Jennifer Wolch (1990) calls the "progressive potential" of the voluntary sector and argue that feminist organizations must continue to advocate for state support for service provision.

Service Provision Under Surveillance: Considering the Impact

Exploring how front line workers experience funding changes and expectations is essential to understanding what impact certain funding relationships can have on the day to day work of organizations. The current

relationship between the neoliberal state and the third sector has changed both the quantity and type of work in voluntary organizations. In order to maintain funding, members of voluntary organizations are often forced to spend large portions of their time collecting data, educating themselves and lobbying politicians (Kravetz 2004, 105-6). Stringent reporting requirements and the dominance of project funding has increased the administrative workload. For example, with the shift to project funding as opposed to core funding, proposals must always appear to be advancing a new project. Each time an organization applies for funding, their proposal is treated as a stand alone project; therefore, details regarding the background of the organization must be provided even if there is already an existing relationship with the funding agency (Phillips and Levasseur 2004, 458). Additionally, organizations are often asked to rewrite proposals, providing minute details and justifications for expenses (2004, 458).

Engaging in a funding relationship with the state also entails learning new skills. Considering the cases of the United States and Latin America, Lisa Markowitz and Karen Tice (2002) describe the increasing professionalization of Non-Governmental Organizations as a result of this. They tell us that new demands often require knowledge of proposal development, accounting and evaluation procedures. They warn that the resulting specialization of some workers and the new emphasis on credentials can create internal hierarchies within the organization (2002, 948-951). In her study of Canadian rural feminist organizations, Leona English (2007) also found that state funding led to professionalization and bureaucracies within organizations and contributed to tensions among personnel. When an organization lacks staff with specialized knowledge of planning and reporting, they are often left to learn the necessary skills with no financial support. For instance, in a recent case study of an Ontario Sexual Assault Centre, one woman described the difficulty she had learning the appropriate statistical software needed for project reporting. Unable to receive any training on the program, she

taught herself through a process of trial and error (Boucher 2007, 68). Learning new skills in this way can be tedious and time consuming. Furthermore, because excessive administrative work is often invisible and behind the scenes, organizations frequently absorb the costs of this labour or risk being viewed as inefficient (Markowitz and Tice 2002, 948; Phillips and Levasseur 2004, 458). In order to fulfill the demands of funding agencies and the needs of their service users, personnel often take their work home or stay after hours, devoting their unpaid time to their organizations (Baines 2004; Boucher 2007, 66-68; Canada 2005, 10; Kravetz 2004).

Changes to the funding relationship, including increased scrutiny on voluntary organizations and the downloading of responsibility for care, make the threat of burn out very real for service providers (Canada 2005; Shields and Evans 1998, 95-96). In addition to the direct policies affecting third sector organizations, a shift towards neoliberalism has created new needs for services. As the state withdraws from its responsibility for the social reproduction of its citizens, the voluntary sector is often expected to fill the "gaps" in service provision (Shields and Evans 1998, 96-7; Wolch 1990, 40-2). Furthermore, as organizations become established and known to the community, demands for services increase (Kravetz 2004, 104).

New expectations can also have a dehumanizing effect on the work being done. Diane Kravetz (2004) found that members of the five feminist organizations she studied were often frustrated with the time and "game playing" necessary to achieve and maintain funding. For example, one research participant told Kravetz (2004, 106), "You work all day on your case-load and then you have to go to some funding meeting and grovel for money when you spent the afternoon with some woman who's been raped." Furthermore, increased emphasis on reporting often removes the "caring content" from service provision. Donna Baines (2004, 278) notes that a move away from holistic care has left many social workers with a profound sense of loss for their caring relationships with service users. However, the

altruistic values of many workers in this sector led them to contribute their unpaid labour in order to provide more compassionate care. Social workers that Baines (2004) spoke to saw this as a strategy of resistance to harsh neoliberal policies and a perceived uncaring society.

In addition to placing strain on members of voluntary organizations, some question whether the current relationship between the state and voluntary organizations allows for any innovation. Funded projects are expected to focus on outcomes, rather than on process; therefore, risk taking and creative problem solving are discouraged (Markowitz and Tice 2002, 948; Philips and Levasseur 2004, 459). Given the trend towards short term funding, government agencies tend to finance projects that can be "...conceptualized, completed and evaluated usually in the space of a fiscal year" (Phillips and Levasseur 2004, 459). This makes it difficult for third sector organizations to advance long term goals which are associated with social change. For instance, one anti-racism group's goal was to challenge and change racist attitudes in Canadian society; however, because these attitudes and behaviours could not be measured over the course of a single year, the group hesitated to propose "creative" projects which might not receive funding (Phillips and Levasseur 2004, 462).

Closely related to this issue, concerns about the ability of organizations to advocate are also increasingly expressed. Although many third sector organizations prioritize a dual role as both service providers and social advocates, funding agencies are much more likely to support the provision of social services (Kravetz 2004, 105; Mencher 1999; Wolch 1990, 211). For example, changes made to SWC demonstrate the ways that advocacy has been marginalized and stigmatized by the Canadian state. In 2006 the Status of Women Minister, Bev Oda, announced sweeping funding cuts[3] and the closure of the majority of SWC regional offices. Additionally, the words "equality", "advocacy" and "action" were removed from the Terms and Conditions of the SWC mandate (O'Grady 2006, 79). After harsh criticism from women's groups across the country,[4] funding was reinstated and the word "equality" was reincorporated into the mandate. However, the emphasis remains on women's "...increased participation in economic, social and democratic life" (Status of Women Canada 2009). Furthermore, research, ongoing activities and domestic advocacy are no longer eligible for funding (O'Grady 2006; Status of Women Canada 2009). This approach to the funding relationship limits the ability of feminist organizations to educate policy makers and actively discourages any dialogue between these groups (O'Grady 2006).

Considering the changes made to SWC, the effectiveness of policy tools such as the Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue and the Code of Good Practice for Funding is questionable. While "soft" policies appear to acknowledge the contributions of the third sector, current state relations with voluntary organizations limit the autonomy of these groups. Instead of encouraging dialogue between the two sectors, the state expects the third sector to quietly take responsibility for social reproduction. Wolch (1990) argues that this trend marks the creation of what she calls a "shadow state." The shadow state is composed of apparatus which are not officially incorporated into the state, yet perform welfare state functions. While not formally a part of the state, these organizations are regulated and subsidized by it and often forfeit their autonomy (1990, 41). As the voluntary sector takes on an increasing role in service provision, the state's influence on its activities grows (1990, 210). Given the considerable restraints placed on funded third sector organizations, one is left to question if it is worthwhile to accept state resources.

Considering the "Progressive Potential"

Suspicious of funding arrangements, Wolch (1990, 215) questions whether voluntary organizations are able to be critical of state policy when they are dependent on public funds. However, although she is aware of the implications of state interference, she also acknowledges the "progressive potential" of the third sector (1990, 218). She argues that it has the opportunity to play four vital

roles. First, it is able to respond in a more flexible and immediate way to service users' needs and, thus, acts as an alternative source of services. Second, volunteer associations can often empower service recipients by allowing them to have more input into the design of the service delivery which can result in the creation of new social networks. Third, the voluntary sector has the potential to generate more humane and creative ways of organizing productive and reproductive labour. Finally, and most importantly, Wolch (1990, 221) contends that the third sector is an important source of advocacy and can make demands for state accountability and responsiveness. This, she argues, is "...the most fundamental progressive purpose of the voluntary sector" (1990, 221).

Although institutionalization is dangerous and can lead to co-optation, feminist organizations are aware of the risks and find ways to resist the negative impacts of a relationship with the state. Nancy Matthews (1995) discusses the fates of six Rape Crisis Centres (RCC's) in Los Angeles and notes that RCCs' relationships with funding agencies are contingent on the political context and can change over time. She identifies three strategic stances towards funding agencies: overt opposition, apparent accommodation and active engagement. Overt opposition is often a reaction to state control. Organizations which make this choice are aware of the consequences. In the case of the RCC which refused to cooperate with the demands of its funding agency, the organization lost its funding and was forced to shut its doors (1995, 296-7). Appearing to conform to the rules, RCCs which engage in apparent accommodation often resist the demands imposed upon them covertly. This tactic is common and involves "...creatively bend[ing] the rules to fit the needs of the organization" (1995, 301). Finally, active engagement with funding agencies involves attempts to change policies. This means that organizations must enter into dialogue with political bodies. While this strategy appears to be the least dangerous, organizations which adopt it must dedicate substantial time and energy into political and bureaucratic processes (1995, 301-4).

Matthews' (1995) discussion reminds us that organizations do not blindly enter into funding relationships with the state.[5] Furthermore, while their autonomy is often limited, they are not powerless and find ways to resist the undermining of their mandates. Claire Reinelt (1995, 85) tells us that the challenge for feminists is to find a way to both provide services and promote a feminist program for change. She notes that for battered women's shelters, radical feminist philosophies which called for the rejection of state support were often impractical for economic and political reasons. Given the everyday reality of the work, funding and community support is necessary to sustain these organizations. Furthermore, some shelter activists argue that states and corporations should be financially responsible for work dedicated to eradicating violence (1995, 88-9).

When one views the services provided by feminist organizations and the broader third sector through the lens of social reproduction, this argument is particularly convincing. Organizations that engage in service provision find it difficult to avoid a relationship with the state. Further, the services they provide are often intimately linked to their social change goals (Boucher 2007; Kravetz 2004). Feminist organizations are fulfilling one aspect of their progressive potential by offering alternative services. Additionally, many aim to empower their service users and develop more humane ways of organizing (Wolch 1990). However, as the state continues to download responsibilities for service provision onto the third sector, feminist organizations and other voluntary associations must continue to call for state accountability.

Conclusions

As part of the broader voluntary sector, feminist organizations provide many important services. A funding relationship with the state complicates this work, highlighting many contradictions for feminist service providers. Recent neoliberal policies have meant that the state has largely disengaged itself from direct service provision and this has had significant impacts on the voluntary

sector. Increases in need, changes to the funding relationship and stringent demands for accountability have placed substantial strain on service providers. Additionally, these changes have also meant that the autonomy of voluntary organizations is threatened and, when considering the recent history of SWC, we can see that advocacy has been directly attacked.

In spite of these difficulties, I have argued that feminist organizations must continue to engage with the state. Wolch (1990) asserts that the third sector has an important role to play in making demands upon the state. Feminist organizations cannot afford to remain silent and must continue to place pressure on the state to support the third sector through both financial resources and the creation of collaborative relationships. In order for collaboration between these two sectors to be achieved, the state must also be willing to grant voluntary organizations some autonomy. Engaging with the state is both dangerous and difficult and requires creative and flexible strategies; however, the question for feminists is not whether we engage with the state but rather how we do so. Although this work is arguably the most difficult, it is also the most important.

Endnotes

1. Ferree and Hess (2000, 141) define co-optation as "...being absorbed into the policy structures that one has been fighting against."
2. The third sector is also referred to as the nonprofit sector, nongovernmental organizations, civil society, social economy, the voluntary sector and "The Commons" (Boris 2006, 1; Shields and Evans 1998, 89). I use the terms "the third sector," "the voluntary sector" and "voluntary organizations/associations" interchangeably throughout this paper.
3. These changes are part of a history of funding slashes to welfare programs and a withdrawal of support to women's groups which began in the 1980s under the Mulroney Progressive Conservative government (Brodie and Bakker 2007; Chappell 2002; Jenson 2008, 191).
4. For example, see the Coalition of Provincial

and Territorial Advisory Councils on the Status of Women (2006).
5. Daniel Trudeau (2008) makes similar claims. He urges us to adopt a relational view of the shadow state and to analyze the multiple outcomes possible in state-nonprofit relations. Although he recognizes the asymmetrical power relations present, he argues that "...there is a continuum of possible relationships that nonprofits can form with government agencies" (2008, 673).

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