

Women as Agents of Change. Towards a Normative History of Protest

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Abstract: The contributions of this book are unique in that they analyse different cases of “gendered” protest in the Western world, from ancient to modern times, in an interdisciplinary manner. They build on the question of what constitutes women’s protest and offer theories from various standpoints of the historical relationship between gender and protest as mutually constitutive. In this review, I analyse some of the limits to these theoretical observations and the conclusions that are drawn from them. I argue that the significance of the book lies in the evidence that it presents of the normative nature of protests – not only in the contributions that discuss protests that uphold gender norms, but also in those that discuss apparently subversive protests – which calls on us to rethink the role of women in driving change.

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Frank Jacob's and Jowan A. Mohammad's book is largely guided by two arguments. First, historically, in Europe and the US, protests by women – both as individuals and as groups that are part of social movements – have not necessarily and entirely challenged the gender norms that have curtailed them. Second, women have played a more active part in social change than historians and culturalists from the different contexts that the book discusses have fully recognised, and a study of “gendered” forms of protest can help understand the extent of their political participation. Through the various contributions in the book, the latter argument is shown to be a well-substantiated and useful thesis. The former, however, appears limited by its failure to contextualise the norms that “gendered” forms of protests have challenged or upheld and, thereby, account for the simultaneously normative nature of the protests that the authors describe.

This limitation can perhaps be attributed to the theoretical premise that is outlined in the introduction to the book, written by the editors. Drawing from Judith Butler, they define gender as a “socio-cultural construct” that is a “fluid category, open to steady processes of redefinition depending on the society in question or the latter's representatives that formulate the respective categories” (p. 1). Despite suggesting that the “fluidity” of gender is itself constructed by societal powers, the authors write of it as a given, and further argue that it allows for the successful contestation and redefinition of gender norms through protests. In doing so, they fail to account for their own argument that the possibility for protest ultimately depends on the resources at the disposal of the protesting actors. Relatedly, they evade the evidence presented by other chapters in the volume that show that “gendered” protests, even when they appear to oppose the gender norms of the given time, in fact do not always challenge them completely.

A second factor that contributes to the main limitations of the book is its failure to historicise protest formations and its conflicting definitions of “gendered protest”. In the book (e.g., in the contributions by Mariela Fargas Peñarrocha, Jacob, Mohammed, and Heike Mißler), “gendered protest” refers to the actions of those who challenge gender norms as oppressive and patriarchal. However, it also refers to the actions of those who reproduce norms of masculinity in challenging power (Steinar Aas) as well as those who uphold gender norms (Sigrun Borgen Wik), including through nationalist and racist means (Martin Göllnitz).

Given that the socio-economic conditions and power structures that shape protests and their representations themselves are not explored in the contributions, these varying definitions appear contradictory, undermining the overall aim of the book to theorise the relationship between gender structures and protest formations.

Although some contributions fail to account for the normative and conforming nature of protests, it is not only the chapters by Aas, Borgen Wik, and Göllnitz that make the book an interesting read. The first three chapters – by Sabine Müller on ancient Greek historiography, Borgen Wik on Icelandic Norse sagas, and Beñat Elortza Larrea on the depictions of aristocratic women in medieval Scandinavian historiography – describe the conditions under which women's protests were recognised as such, not least because of the social positions of the protesting women themselves. Müller challenges depictions of war as exclusively male spaces in ancient Greek and Roman historiography, focusing on two historians, Herodotos and Polyainos, who describe the defeat of Kyros II of Persia by the female ruler Tomyris of the Massagetan people as an act of protest by a ruler defending her realm against Kyros' attempts to integrate it into his empire. Despite the heroic depictions of Tomyris' actions, however, Müller writes that the war remains a male affair in so far as Tomyris is shown as acting on behalf of her son (as described by Herodotos) and seen as an "imitator of men" (by Polyainos).

Borgen Wik and Elortza Larrea also examine instances of women's protests as significantly normative. While Elortza Larrea describes the political roles of "ordinary" aristocratic women in Scandinavia as opposed to the exceptional female rulers that are usually researched, Borgen Wik analyses descriptions of "whetting" by elite, low-status, and unfree women in the 13th-century Icelandic sagas of *Íslendingasögur*. The authors of the sagas present women as posing a threat to elite men by simply voicing their doubts regarding a man's actions or lack thereof, thereby successfully questioning his honour and forcing him into blood feuds with other men. The fact that unfree women also participated in this form of whetting in the sagas suggests, according to Borgen Wik, that the women were used to "re-establish a sense of conformity in the way the rigid honor system was maintained" (p. 34).

However, despite concluding that the motif of whetting possibly served the sagas' authors in "pushing for conformity" (p. 43) – which may have been explored further by outlining the context in which the sagas were written and perhaps providing the authors' biographical details – Borgen Wik does not explain potential consistencies between the sagas' depictions of whetting as a form of protest and its use by their authors to further their own interests. In contrast,

Elortza Larrea's descriptions of the political careers of the two Scandinavian aristocratic women Inga of Varteig and Ingebjørg Håkonsdatter, who acted to secure their respective sons' elections as kings, compares their historical depictions as virtuous and representing ideal values of an aristocratic woman. She refers to administrative documents of the time that showed them as dissenting against other rulers and elite opponents to the throne, for example exercising political agency.

Elortza Larrea, like Müller on Greek historiography, presents the argument that normative representations of dissenting and protesting women (including those sponsored by women themselves) undermined the real significance of the women's acts. However, both Elortza Larrea and Müller do so by drawing a contrast between the "ultra-normative" (p. 59) depictions of women as virtuous (in Elortza Larrea's essay), of women as merely acting on behalf of men (in both Elortza Larrea and Müller), and the act of political agency displayed by the dissenting or protesting women. They do not discuss in this regard, however, as their evidence also shows, the normative boundaries of these women's roles as aristocratic mothers and the privileges that were afforded to them accordingly.

Fargas Peñarrocha's contribution on the "silent protest" (p. 65) of a woman against her family's norms of marriage in 17th-century Barcelona, interestingly, describes the violence that elite women in charge of familial matters and with access to their family's wealth inflicted upon other women relatives that were expected to obey them. The chapter describes the institution of sequestration that was accessible to Narcissa, a woman from an elite family who used sequestration to stay with a different family, secluding herself from her own female relatives to grant herself more freedom to decide about her marriage. Although it temporarily provided her "a freedom that she had not known before" (p. 76), allowing her to spend time with her lover, this freedom was also limited in so far as her family was able to make the case of a problematic sequestration, driving her to a state of distress that resulted in her conceding in their favour.

Peñarrocha concludes that Narcissa did not fail but was faced with self-doubt that limited her capacity to bring about change. If not for the focus on Narcissa's character, the chapter could have explored in more detail the institutional limits that Narcissa faced in her protests, analysing the systemic silencing of her protests, in contrast to reading her silence itself as an act of protest. In this regard, the significant question is not so much whether Narcissa succeeded or failed in her protests but about the normative boundaries of marriage (whether with the man arranged by her family or her chosen lover) within which she was able to make her claim for freedom.

Other contributions focus more directly on the question of the limits to women's protests and attempts to misrepresent and quell them. Similarly, how-

ver, they often fail to account for the normative nature of the protests in question, not least as reflected by the limits that the protestors faced. This is evident in Jacob's essay on the life of the American anarchist Emma Goldman, who advocated for a revolution based on women's political and sexual emancipation, especially from marriage. In doing so, she made enemies of not only the state authorities but also the "bourgeois parts of the women's movement" (p. 93). However, the limits of her protests are visible in the fact that it remained unclear how one was to achieve these ideals of gender equality other than by urging women to "overcome their belief that men were superior" (p. 93) – especially given that it was not only conservative groups that portrayed Goldman as "dangerous" and that she was also seen as controlling the actions of the "good anarchist" men (p. 98).

Mohammed's essay on women's protest groups in early 20th-century New York City shows that anti-war protest spaces in the city offered women the opportunity to raise feminist awareness and, subsequently, demand equal rights for women. However, without exploring the socio-economic contexts of the protest spaces that were able to support women's organisations, Mohammed's argument that the war itself offered an "opportunity" (p. 106, p. 108) to women for demanding not only better educational opportunities and wages but also political rights remains counterintuitive to a study of the protests as emerging from anti-war efforts.

Florian Wenninger's chapter describes the role of women in the Austrian social-democratic militia Republican Protection League (*Republikanischer Schutzbund*) in carrying out the 1934 uprising against the German military, the police, and right-wing paramilitary groups. Wenninger shows that women were actively involved in the *Schutzbund's* basic organisation, even though they were not formally part of its "exercising" (p. 163) wing. At the same time, however, they were able to be involved – informally and including when they took up arms – only to the extent that their capacities as mothers and wives of the male *Schutzbund* members allowed them.

The book ends with the chapters by Jana Günther on women's protests as a claim to "symbolic" status and Mißler on the strategies of anti-abortion activism in Germany. Günther presents a history of feminist movements in the Western world to argue that feminism has served to unite various protests – such as protests based on gender equality, sexuality rights, and self-determination – and, simultaneously, become an "identification category of young successful Western women of the middle and upper classes" (p. 201). However, Günther does not trace the relationship between possible conflicts arising from the protest goals of feminism – conflicts that exist along social inequalities, as Günther

writes – and feminism’s operation as a “marketable” category (p. 201). Instead, the essay’s uncritically positive evaluation of the “symbolic” nature of feminist protest allows for the argument that the various goals of feminism enabled new forms of solidarity and the expression of new goals, while leaving unclear how they came to be despite their conflictual nature.

Mißler’s essay identifies the ideological basis of anti-abortion activism in the city of Saarbrücken, Germany, as related to larger anti-abortion movements, which, according to Mißler, are propelled by the impetus to protect the nuclear, heteronormative family in the face of challenges posed to it by feminism. Mißler traces the connections between religious conservatism and right-wing movements in Germany to their shared rejection of liberalism. What remains unclear in the contribution is the relationship between these connections and the development of the “New Right”, which the chapter mentions, and its adoption of neoliberalism as well as femonationalism (Farris 2017, 6–17) and homonationalism (Schulman 2011), which have been well established in relevant academic research, and the role of these phenomena in debates on gender within right-wing movements in Germany. Further, the characterisation of the anti-abortion movements as anti-democratic seems oversimplified, given that the movements use the democratic means available to them through protests and civil society organisations in order to make their demands.

Two contributions that diverge from the book’s focus on women’s protests are presented by Aas, who writes about the anti-military protests of the male workforce of a mining company on the borders of Norway and Sweden that radicalised the labour movement in Norway, and by Göllnitz, who discusses the construction of militant masculinity by the violent National-Socialist men’s association *Sturmabteilung* (SA) during the Nazis’ rise to power. Aas shows that the miners’ protests were men’s protests since it was the young working men that were to directly suffer from compulsory conscription and explains the lack of women’s participation in these protests by referring to studies that argue that the working-class women accepted their suppressed position and considered politics a naturally male sphere. The chapter’s lack of analysis of such studies, however, undermines the evidence that it presents to argue that the male miners’ positions within the labour movement – as opposed to the working-class women, who held only passive memberships within both the labour and the women’s movements – allowed them to mobilise based on their networks with other working-class men, including in other parts of Scandinavia, such as Sweden and Finland, through the mobile workforce that brought them in.

Finally, the chapter by Göllnitz appears as the most significant with regard to the book's overall theme of the normativity of protest, in so far as it asks whether the SA's hypermasculine violence can be understood as a protest against "the politics of the Weimar Republic, which the National Socialists considered 'unmanly' and 'quasi-feminine'" (p. 184). However, the arguments suggest a circular logic that attributes the physical violence that the SA carried out to its self-representation as a group of violent and racist militants that were responding to a fear of social decline and as excluding women based on ideas of "good" German women and girls. What instead becomes apparent through the evidence presented is the SA's use of racist violence as a tool of protest that called for the re-establishment of the existing social order based on male superiority – a significant if not radical suggestion in regard to the nature of the protest that Göllnitz, like the other contributors to the book, falls short of making.

Despite these shortcomings, the book overall presents a good argument for the thesis that women (and men) were active agents of change when they protested within the means available to them *as* women (and *as* men). It is for this reason, however, that the primary argument that protest and gender share a "reciprocal relationship" (p. 4), as proposed by the editors of the book, remains flawed. While showing that gender norms indeed have shaped protest actions, the contributions simultaneously reveal that the reverse was often not true in the same sense. Therefore – since in some cases, it is clear that it was the protestors' socio-economic status as elite women that made their protest actions possible, while in others, it was their status as men, both elite and working class – the question that remains is one that concerns the relationship between the protestors' socio-economic status in relation to the gender norms of the time and their ability to influence change.

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