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Sophie STOFFEL

Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis
Centre de Recherches en Science politique
Boulevard du Jardin botanique, 43
B- 1000 Brussels
E-mail : stoffel@ulb.ac.be
Phone : +32(0)2 787 93 30
Fax : +32(0)2 211 78 50

“Are the Institutionalised Feminist Organisations Political Representatives? Lesson from the Chilean case”

Working paper

In this paper, I propose to use my Chilean fieldwork on the institutionalisation of feminism to offer an alternative reading of political representation, thinking through key elements of the ‘who’ (institutionalised feminist organisations), the ‘where’ (non-electoral sphere) and the ‘how’ (presence and interaction with the women’s policy agency) of the substantive representation of women (Celis, Childs, Krook & Kantola 2008). By testing alternative accounts, political representation can be enlarged beyond the electoral sphere and beyond the traditional dual relationship between represented and representatives (Lovenduski 2005, Mazur 2002, Rehfeld 2006, Saward 2006, 2008, Weldon 2002).

I define the “Institutionalised feminist organisations” as the women’s groups which: see themselves as feminist, have (or seek to have) access to the funding of public institutions and are (or seek to be) involved in an interaction with the state and/or international organisms.

I aim to show that one can consider that those feminist organisations are political representatives as long as makers of representation recognize them as such and give them access to resources necessary to perform the representation: recognition, funds and access to negotiation and policy-making. The notions of authorization and accountability of representatives still have meaning but they should be reframed.

In this paper, I propose to use my Chilean fieldwork on the institutionalisation of feminism to offer an alternative reading of political representation, by thinking through key elements of the “who” (institutionalised feminist organisations), the “where” (non-electoral sphere) and the “how” (presence and interaction with the women’s policy agency) of the substantive representation of women (Celis, Childs, Krook & Kantola 2008).

Since the middle of the 80s and the end of Pinochet’s dictatorship, part of the Chilean feminist movement moved towards greater “institutionalisation” by setting-up in non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Concretely, these feminist NGOs adopted a formal status and their professionalisation and specialisation led to develop a gender expertise. Institutionalisation – or “NGO-isation” – were pursued for pragmatic and political reasons: they needed funds to continue with their activities and they considered that progress in matters of women’s rights and gender equality had to work through public institutions. Their target was to be recognised as privileged interlocutors by institutions, then to contribute to the creation of a women’s policy agency and to take part in policy-making and legislative reforms (through lobbying, advocacy, studies, etc.). In consequence, I define the “institutionalised feminist organisations” as the women’s groups which: see themselves as feminist, have (or seek to have) access to the funding of public institutions and are (or seek to be) involved in an interaction with the state and/or international organisms. Of course, the “institutionalised” feminist NGOs represent just one sector of the feminist activism, which one is itself just a part of the women’s activism¹ (Alvarez 1999, Franceschet 2005, Rìos 2003, Rìos, Godoy & Guerrero 2003, Stoffel 2007, Valdés 2000).

The discourses of feminist NGOs about their representation and representativeness, such as « *feminists represent women* » and « *feminists speak in the name of women* », inspired me to think about feminist NGOs not only as actresses of social or political participation but also as political representatives. Event though they have not been elected by women to

¹ I gathered my empirical data during my fieldwork in Chile. In 2003 and 2005, I conducted 20 semi-directive and 13 directive interviews with personalities related to gender equality in feminist NGOs, the Chilean Women’s political agency (SERNAM), political parties, the Congress and universities. The first set focused on the role of feminist NGOs in the “politisisation” of the question of women’s political representation. The second set was related to the interaction between feminist NGOs and SERNAM around several issues such as gender quotas and parity, violence, justice and media. I met feminist leaders from the NGOs: *Centro de Estudios de la Mujer*, *Con-Spirando*, *Domos*, *Foro-Red de Salud y Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos*, *Fundacion Ideas*, *Humanas*, *Grupo Iniciativa Mujer*, *Instituto de la Mujer*, *Isis International*, *La Morada*. I also had the opportunity to be part of a Belgian official delegation and to assist the « participation and women’s rights » department of SERNAM, in the context of a cooperation agreement on gender equality (in 2005 and 2006).

represent them, they claim to do so. NGOs are not accountable to women but they are nevertheless recognised as women's representatives, by some institutional actors – SERNAM (*Servicio Nacional de la Mujer*, the Chilean women's policy agency) or international cooperation agencies. I had then to define political representation in a way that allows me to deal with field observations such as: « *NGOs seem to be more accountable to SERNAM or international backers rather than women* » or « *NGOs 'do' political representation although their legitimacy does not come from election and they do not have any obligation of accountability towards the people they represent* ».

Conventional accounts appear to limit political representation to the formal political sphere and the election. They tend to assimilate political representation and liberal representative government – although the latter is an historical contingency (Manin 1996, Przeworski, Stokes & Manin (éd.) 1999). And, according to this conventional point of view, people are supposed to have objectives and identifiable interests that “just wait” to be represented by accountable representatives. To represent is to act in the name of the represented and in their interest (Pitkin 1972). In consequence, conventional accounts of representation do not help to understand “what is going on in political representation” when there are no democratic procedures of election, nor accountability (Rehfeld 2005, 2006, Saward 2006, 2008).

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I mixed thus feminist/gender and performative approaches on political representation. My aim was to find or construct a definition for representation that could be useful for a collective actor, actor which is not part of the formal political sphere, which has not been elected by its represented and which does not fulfil the criteria of authorisation and accountability associated with the liberal representative democracy. By testing these alternative accounts, political representation can be enlarged beyond the electoral sphere and the traditional relationship between represented and representatives.

I aim to show that the institutionalisation of feminism in Chile is about political representation. I defend the idea that one can consider that those feminist organisations are political representatives as long as makers of representation recognize them as such and give them access to resources necessary to perform political representation, such as recognition, funds and access to negotiation and policy-making. The notions of authorization and accountability of representatives still have meaning but they should be reframed.

Feminist/gender accounts of political representation

Feminist/gender researchers introduced gender equality in the theories of political representation (Celis, Childs, Kantola & Krook 2008, Lovenduski (ed.) 2005, Mackay 2004, Mazur 2002, 2008, Norris 2004, *Representation* 2008, Riot-Sarcey (dir.) 1995, Squires 1999, Tremblay, Ballmer-Cao, Marques-Pereira & Sineau (dir.) 2007, Schwindt-Bayer 2005, Tremblay & Andrew (dir.) 1997, Weldon 2002). They question the status of women as representatives, as represented and as a stake of representation. Their works on the “descriptive” representation focus on the access and the presence of women in the political decision-taking process, and also on the mechanisms that encourage or slow down this presence. Research on the “substantive” representation is more related to the qualitative dimension of public policies and to their gender-friendly character. Finally, « state feminism » theories study women’s policy agencies and their interaction with women’s collective actors (Bereni & Révillard 2007, Dauphin 2005, Lovenduski (ed.) 2005, Mazur 2002, 2008, McBride Stetson & Mazur 1995, Watson (ed.) 1990). The configuration of these actors is particular: women’s policy agencies were created as a direct or indirect response to national and/or international women’s mobilisations – that explains why these agencies are, *à tort ou à raison*, labelled “activist institutions” – and women’s collective actors work to influence the latter in order to gender the political agenda and public policies. State feminism pinpoint the strategy of alliances building, and the configuration of inter-individual and institutional networks between feminists and their allies in various political, professional and activist sectors of society – see the “triangles” (Vargas & Wieringa 1998, Woodward 2000), “strategic partnership” (Haalsa 1998) or “feminist policy” (Mazur 2008, Lovenduski 2005).

Feminist/gender studies on political representation help to think of such actors as “direct” political representatives and invite us to extend political representation beyond the electoral game of legitimacy. Political representation can be defined as the intervention of critical actors in different steps of the political decision-taking process and in different spaces where gender and women’s issues are framed. Thus, individuals (female or male, elected or not, from the formal political sphere or civil society), institutions, feminist movements, but also political cabinets, courts of justice, universities or administration can be considered as critical actors or potential spaces for political representation (Celis, Childs, Kantola & Krook 2008). Until now, women’s movements, feminist NGOs and women’s policy agencies have played the main role in improving the substantive representation of women. That is the reason why I have essentially based my work on feminist NGOs and SERNAM.

Performative accounts of political representation

Other alternative approaches of the concept of political representation suggest that actors and stakes of representation are constructed by the performance (and the discourse) of representation – from there, the idea to label these approaches as “performative” (Ankersmit 2002, Parkinson 2004, Rehfeld 2005, 2006, Runciman 2007, Saward 2006, 2008, Street 2004).

According to the performative point of view, political representation can be thought without a necessary reference to the notions of representative democracy, elections, authorisation and accountability. Furthermore, non-elected candidates can be recognised as political representatives (Mansbridge 2003, Saward 2008). Here, political representation is not reduced to an interpersonal link between representatives and represented. It is rather a matter of recognition and, as such, it is argued to extend the representation link to new categories of actors: those who pretend to be representative (the “candidates” or “would-be representatives”, see Saward 2006), those who could be represented, those who have the power to decide whether one is representative or represented (the “makers of representation”, see Rehfeld 2006, or the “claim makers”, see Saward 2006), those who facilitate or encourage the representation (the “relays”, see Street 2004), and those who assist the performance (the publics) – all of that according to rules and procedures defined in order to organise political representation.

The performative reading of political representation can be presented as follow: 1) there is a function to be accomplished, a situation to be managed or a role to be performed in the arena of politics, which need an activity of representation; 2) some individuals claim to put themselves forward in the name, or in the interests, of others; 3) they aspire to see their claims recognised in order to be accepted as representatives by different publics ; 4) to make their claims become reality, candidates to representation attempt to present some supporting characteristics and/or capacities to do so and propose a discourse about the represented (their identities, their interests, their needs) ; 5) all of that according to current cultural codes (in a large sense), rules and procedures.

In such a context, what “makes” political representation is nor the authorisation by the represented, neither the election. What institutes representation is the recognition of the legitimacy of the representation claim. Representation depends on the acceptability, by certain people who possess the power to recognise the representation, of the claim by would-be representatives to represent other persons, in order to promote their interests.

However, performative approaches show two limits in their developments. First, they do not define who are the “makers of representation”, the actors who can recognise the legitimacy of the candidates to representation. Second, the issue of the funding of representation is left behind. In fact, the stake of funding seems invisible when we think about liberal representation, as long as members of Parliament receive a income, a budget and a logistic structure that allow them to accomplish their function of representatives. But what happens for the other kinds of candidates to representation?

To respond to these failures, I propose to define the “makers of representation” as the people or institutions who have to power to allocate resources. Indeed, to the questions « *What establishes an individual as a maker of representation?* » and « *What motivates a potential representative to claim representation?* », I suggest this answer: the access to the resources necessary for representation. By which I mean three kinds of resources: symbolic resources (in terms of recognition, legitimacy or audience acceptance of the claims); material resources (in terms of funds, subsidies, grants, etc.); and political resources (in terms of recognition as political interlocutor, access to the political debate, negotiation, decision-taking and policy-making processes). To my point of view, political representation occurs when individuals or institutions who possess the resources necessary for representation, accept the pretensions of some claimants to represent other people, by giving them access to those resources.

The question is now: how are the candidates to representation recognised as legitimate? As long as they cannot appeal to the conventional democratic procedures of consent and accountability, they could refer to two « *ersatz* » of authorisation and accountability. On one side, would-be representatives could argue that there is no objection against their claims (Runciman 2007) – in place of a formal authorisation. That means that the represented do not passively submit themselves to being taken charge of by the representative, they have the possibility to object to the representation but they do not object. In other words, the legitimacy of representation is conditioned by the possibility that the represented can express their opposition to the proposed representation relationship.

On the other side, candidates to representation could appeal to “ready-mades figures” of what should be a “good representative” (Parkinson 2004, Saward 2008) in order to sustain their “demonstrable representativeness” (Corner 2000 in Street 2004) – an « *ersatz* » for an “anticipated accountability”. In particular, the “authorised voice”, the “voice of the street”, the “champion of a cause”, the “initiator”, the “public debate facilitator” and, last but not least,

the “expert” are figures that are mainly used by would-be representatives or by the ones who speak about them. Furthermore, the political weight of a representation claim is also considered as a criterion to demonstrate the legitimacy of somebody to represent.

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If we consider now the Chilean field, from the performative point of view, we can say that there is a function to be accomplished in order to improve the realities of life of Chilean women and their rights, or a situation of gender inequality and discrimination to be fought. In that context, feminist NGOs are one kind of the potential collective actors that could claim to be representatives for women and their interests. Feminist NGOs would make their claims be recognised by “makers” of representation, who could allow them the resources necessary to represent effectively women. In Chile, the main “makers” of representation (in our case study) are SERNAM, political parties, members of Parliament and international cooperation agencies. Private companies could also be seen as “makers” of representation, especially in its symbolic and material dimensions. The recognition of feminist NGOs’ claims could be facilitated with the support of “relays” or “intermediaries” such as medias, other feminine/feminist NGOs or the Catholic Church. We could even say that these “relays” are in fact “makers” of representation in its symbolic dimension, as long as they contribute to the symbolic recognition of NGOs by diffusing their discourse and promoting their activities (Baldez 1999, 2001, 2002, Barton 2002, Barton & Murray Warwick 2002, Dandavati 2005, Franceschet 2001, 2003, 2005, Gonzalez & Kampwirth (eds.) 2001, Guillaudat & Mouterde 1998, Matear 1997, Molina 1998, Rios 2003, Rios, Godoy & Guerrero 2003, Salazar & Pinto 1999, Stoffel 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, Valdés 2000, Waylen 1992, 1995, 2000).

In conclusion, the definition of political representation in terms of recognition and access to symbolic, material and political resources seems pertinent to study the institutionalisation process of the Chilean feminist movement. Let us have a closer look at the three dimensions of the recognition of feminist NGOs.

The symbolic recognition of feminist NGOs

The symbolic recognition of feminist NGOs consists in attesting their legitimacy as future “good representatives”. The interviews that I conducted in Chile helped me to construct six figures.

The first figure is the one of the « heiress ». This figure testifies the “filiation” to the feminist movement of the 80s. It confers the compromise of feminist NGOs with democracy

and human rights, since the feminist movement took the street besides the human rights activists against Pinochet and his dictatorship. The figure of “heiress” also confirms a global and a transversal reading of women’s issues in relation with gender power and men, since the feminist point of view (in particular the Chilean one during the 80s) considers women’s issues as social, cultural, political and legal constructions. By claiming their heritage of the 80s feminism, NGOs assure that their representation will not be reduced to a defence of sectorial or group interests.

The second figure is the one of the “interlocutor producer of discourse”. It makes reference to the recognition of NGOs discourses by other social and political actors, that is their recognition as valid social interlocutors, actresses of democracy and producers of a discourse which is adopted (or, at least, a part of it) by politicians, political parties, administration, press, etc. This argument is a guaranty of the capacity, by the would-be representatives, to present themselves in the public sphere, to make their voice to be heard and to diffuse their discourse (analysis, political demands, proposals). In other words, this figure shows that feminist candidates to representation are already present in the public debate.

The third figure is the one of the “expert”. This figure attests the professionalism and the specialisation of would-be representatives in relation with gender and women’s issues. The institutionalisation allowed the Chilean feminist movement to have a greater stability in terms of status, finances and research teams. It helped to develop their professional expertise on gender and women’s stakes framed in political terms (such as legal reforms, public policy proposals, positive action measures). The claim to be a “good representative” for women’s interests is reinforced by the gender expertise.

The fourth figure is the one of the “interconnected” which is, to my opinion, the most interesting and innovating figure in the “demonstrable representativeness” of the feminist NGOs. This figure is related to the capacity of feminist NGOs to build strategic alliances with other women’s NGOs and with other professional or activist sectors, and this, beyond political partisanship and borders. Networks which they are part of, are transversal, sectorial and intersectorial, national, trans-national or regional.

Thanks to the personal relationships of their leaders, NGOs shows their capacity to go out of the “feminist room” and to interact with other sectors. The intersectorial transversality refers to the construction of alliances with other sectors (political parties, SERNAMEC, the Parliament, universities, professional spheres). It depends in particular on the fact that

feminist leaders moved from one sector to another during their professional career and activism. The partisan transversality is related to the ambiguous relationship to political parties (Baldez 1999, 2001, Kirkwood 1982, 1986, Macaulay 2006, Marques-Pereira 2005, Salinero 2004, Yoclevzky 2002). During the 80s, feminists chose an a-partisan or a trans-partisan position, because it was a time of dictatorship and prohibition of any progressist political life (in the Parliament, parties, unions and medias). They had also to solve the “double activism” dilemma between feminism and political ideology. Nowadays is a relationship with centre-left political parties possible although it is always tainted of suspicion and ambiguity. Nevertheless, NGOs seem to consider that political parties are also actors that could give them access to the political debate. Strong links exist with two parties of the centre-left coalition in power (the Party for Democracy and the Socialist Party) since the return to democracy. Indeed, feminists helped then their militants to win the Referendum against Pinochet in 1988 and to elect the Concertation government in 1989. Some NGOs also tried to interact with political parties of the opposition present in the Parliament (the Democrat Independent Union and the National Revolution parties), without great success. The only political wing to be ignored by the majority of feminist NGOs is the extra-parliamentarian left (communists, ecologists, anti-capitalists, etc.), even though they were close during the 80s. The reason is that being outside of the Parliament leaves this left wing without “formal” political power – which is not “really interesting” for actors looking for political recognition by formal institutions.

Finally, the sectorial transversality is about the NGOs practice to interact between them and to elaborate common dynamics and projects, through networks or platforms more formal (such as the Group Initiative Women related to the Beijing process in the middle of the 90s). This interaction between feminists takes place at the Chilean level but also at the Latin American and the Caribbean level, due to internal dynamics of feminist movements (via regional feminist encounters (Olea Mauleon (coord.) 1998) or initiated by international institutions (as the United Nations agencies). This last argument was put in evidence by feminist/gender researchers who were working on the political representation of women.

The fifth figure is the one of the “Chilean woman” which allows to demonstrate the identification of feminists to women in Chile and the care to take into account their diversity in political actions. The challenge here is to define political actions or proposals that care about the intertwining or intersectionality between gender and several other power relationships (such as class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, territorial location, disability, etc.)

in the life of Chilean women and in their situation related to men but also to other women. Feminist activists and theoreticians use to make the link between personal experience and collective perspective. Thus they speak in their own name, in the name of the NGO and in the name of all women. This figure of “the Chilean” pleads in favour of the representativeness of NGOs, sometimes in descriptive terms – when NGOs members and their potential represented look like each others –, sometimes in substantive terms – according to the content of the political proposals.

The sixth and last figure is the one of the “friend of the medias”. This figure is related to the access to medias and the diffusion of the NGOs’ voice through television, radio and press. Although various NGOs have pinpointed the necessity to construct a better relationship with the medias, most of the NGOs I have met recognised that they do not effectively reach to be on the air, on TV or in the newspapers kiosks. Nevertheless, their wish to be more present in the public opinion attests their awareness about the media issue, a point that could help them in demonstrating their capacity to be “good representatives”.

I have also studied the non-objection criterion (Runciman 2007), that is the objection that could be addressed to feminist NGOs’ claims to represent Chilean women. There is no objection from the potential represented – women – except if one considers that the mobilisations of pro-Pinochet female activists in the 80s were an objection to feminist NGOs claims to speak in the name of Chilean women – and thus also in the name of the Pinochetist activists (Gonzalez & Kampwirth (eds.) 2001). However, even in that case, this objection should be understood as a competitor claim to represent women, more than an objection from potential represented by feminist NGOs. Besides this competitor claim from the right wing, another competition comes from the left wing of feminist NGOs, which claims to represent better Chilean women than institutionalised feminist organisations: the “autonomous” feminist groups (Lidid, Maldonado *et al.* (eds.) 1997). This minority feminist voice denounced – and still does – the illusion of the taking into account of the interests of women by institutions considered as patriarchal, and the co-optation – even treason – of several feminists. We could also consider that “autonomous” feminists object to be represented by institutionalised feminists. But this objection is actually more motivated by a conflict of strategy inside the feminist field – conflict feed by ten years of private and public divergences and tensions.

The point here is that feminist NGOs engaged with the state do not pretend to

represent all feminist groups but rather Chilean women. Thus, we cannot really consider the objection of other would-be representatives of women (pro-Pinochet female activists or feminist autonomous groups) as an objection by the represented. The fact is that there is no public objection from the majority of women to the representative claim made by feminist NGOs. In consequence, the non-objection criterion attests in a way to the recognition of the pretensions to represent. Maybe the notion of critical mass could be introduced here and used in a reverse way, to escape the minority/majority ratio (Childs & Krook 2006, Bratton 2005). It might not be necessary that a majority of women object to the representative claim of NGOs for their representative claim to be contested, as long as there exists a critical mass of objectors. Of course, the discussion about the quantitative definition of a critical mass remains open. In consequence, the non-objection criterion supports, in that study case, the demonstration of NGOs representativeness.

In conclusion, the symbolic recognition of feminist NGOs happens through their access to public space and through the demonstration of their quality of future “good representatives”. The different figures of “good representatives” attest the recognition by several kinds of institutions, which can be considered as “makers” of the symbolic dimension of representation. Symbolic representation is at the same time a resource for representation and a “lever” to have access to other kinds of resources (material or political). It is not enough for NGOs to see their claims recognised as legitimate in the public space. They also need material resources.

The material recognition of feminist NGOs

The issue of the material recognition of NGOs claims to represent women and their access to funding remains problematic. Actually, if part of the feminist movement decided to move forwards a greater institutionalisation in the 80s and to configure themselves in NGOs, the main particular reason was then to get access to the international cooperation funding.

Although funding is at the core of the « NGO-isation » and NGOs life, I could not collect a lot of information over that issue during my interviews in Chile. A complete state of the financial interaction between NGOs and the state or SERNAM should be done. It should also be of interest to think further the issue of “corporate social responsibility”, which some NGOs refer to. In this case, corporate social responsibility is about private companies financing non-profit activities organised by social or cultural organisms, in the name of their responsibility towards society.

NGOs remain quite evasive about their funding sources and no order is never given – the classical sentence being « *we receive sometimes some financing support from this company or that public agency* ». The discourse is mainly about denouncing SERNAM, which would not help NGOs in a material way, and the state, which should allow real structural funds to civil society. SERNAM defends itself by saying that its budget and missions do not allow financing NGOs. The women’s agency seems at last to contribute with a small logistic help to organise events, or to launch public calls for micro-projects.

Except one NGO that I met and that refuses to use corporate social responsibility to have funds, the other feminist NGOs say that this a source for funds among others and, as such, they would like to benefit it. The only condition, according to them, is to be sure not to have to adapt their own agenda to the new alliance with private companies. But, at the same time, I found few critical thought over that issue. For example, one NGO told me about her engagement with the altermondialist movement and her alliance with ATTAC, while explaining to be looking for corporate funding.

Several questions deserve to be addressed. Does the bringing together feminist NGOs with private companies mean that there is a new feminist strategy, in order to improve equality and women’s rights, or is it just a fact of material needs? Does the feminism institutionalisation in Chile leave the place to its privatisation? Is state feminism being replaced by “market feminism” ? The point that the financing of civil society activities are being taken into charge by market actors, in the absence of being assured by public institutions, is worth to be studied more carefully. In a general way, the role of the democratic state regarding its civil society is also tackled when we think about the political recognition of feminist NGOs.

The political recognition of feminist NGOs

This aspect of political representation refers to the access by feminist NGOs to political debate and negotiation processes. As I decided to study the role of feminist NGOs in political representation – rather than the substantive representation of women in general – I had to look for the actors who allow feminist NGOs to have access to the political debate, to influence the political (gender-related) issues framing and to take part to the negotiation between political decision-takers. In consequence, I focused on SERNAM and (left/centre-left) political parties. This option follows the state feminism theories that underline the privileged role of women’s policy agencies, feminist or “feminist friendly” members of the Parliament

and political parties. But it also corresponded to the feminist NGOs experience on the Chilean political scene.

Since the middle of the 80s, after ten years of dictatorship, political parties are again actors that cannot be ignored in terms of political representation although there was no parliamentary (and democratic) life at that moment. In Chile, the transition to democracy was “negotiated” or “guided” by Pinochet himself. In that context, political parties (especially the Christian-Democrat Party) recovered their pre-eminence in the political game, although the first social actors to take the street against the dictatorship were the unions, students movements, women’s movement and human rights activists (Guillaudat & Mouterde 1998, Yoclevzky 2002).

In consequence, formal political actors such as political parties are meant to play a main role in the political recognition for feminist NGOs. The latter have established, since their creation, an ambiguous relationship with the parties, made of “love” and “hate”. On one side are political parties actors that block access to the political debate for NGOs (being “gatekeepers”) and reproduce in their internal structures discriminatory practices against female party members. Actually, this behaviour made some feminist members or leaders – “double activists” – chose feminist activism upon partisanship. But, on the other side, political parties are in position to facilitate the intervention of NGOs in the political debate (playing then the role of “relays” or “intermediaries” of representation) and initiate positive action measures in order to address gender inequalities (Baldez 1999, 2001, Kirkwood 1982, 1986, Macaulay 2006, Salinero 2004).

SERNAM is also a privileged interlocutor in the political aspects of the representation by feminist NGOs. The Chilean women’s policy agency has a specific status regarding the NGOs. Actually, the creation of SERNAM resulted from the demands of the women’s movement and feminist NGOs during the transition to democracy period. Furthermore, the institution of SERNAM also attested the recognition by the first democratic government (with the same centre-left coalition as today: Christian-Democrat Party, Socialist Party, Party for Democracy and Social Radical Party) of feminist mobilisation against Pinochet and for democracy (Dandavati 2005, Franceschet 2001, 2003, 2005, Guzman, Hola & Rios 1999, Matear 1997, Molina 1998, Waylen 1992, 1995).

SERNAM was created with a law in 1991. It is the political-administrative department (directed by its own minister but under the supervision of the Ministry of Plan) in charge to

impulse policies, programs and measures in order to improve gender equality in the action of all the ministries, administration and civil society (SERNAM 1994a, 1994b, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001). SERNAM is by excellence the actor that could provide the political recognition to feminist NGOs. The potential interaction between SERNAM and NGOs has constituted the object of various studies since its creation. All these analysis refer to the debate on autonomy and integration (or institutionalisation) that has opposed Chilean and Latin American feminists between them all along the 90s. The strategic choices of activists were heavy of disqualifications and prescriptions about what it is to be a “good” or a “genuine” feminist. From a normative but also an analytical point of view, the question of the relationship between NGOs and the state (SERNAM in particular) was often thought in terms of an “all of nothing” alternative: autonomy against the state, or integration to the political institutions, resistance or co-optation. In reality, NGOs have shown that this relationship was – still is – played in a much more balanced way than discourses and studies pretend.

My fieldwork study permits to distinguish several modes of interaction between SERNAM and NGOs. On the initiative of one or the other, this interaction is far from being reduced to a mutual “instrumentalisation”, to the co-optation of NGOs by the state, or to the financial dependency of the latter from SERNAM.

When initiated by SERNAM, the interaction with feminist NGOs consists, until now, in using their expertise in gender issues, and involving them in the organisation of “third sector” services (for women victims of violence, for example), that is “public non-institutional” services (Bresser Pereira & Cunill Grau 1998). Furthermore, SERNAM has made the wish to organise women in civil society actresses. This last aim, that has all the attention of SERNAM since the election of President Michelle Bachelet, consists in training “non-organised” women to leadership and to involve them in the elaboration of a common agenda with SERNAM (in other words, with the centre-left coalition). Nevertheless, the care of SERNAM Minister Laura Albornoz to turn the civil society female sectors into a “resonance chamber” for government proposals appears to me to be highly questionable. Of course, SERNAM needs the grassroots movements support in order to face the resistance expressed by some wings of the government, the opposition, the Church and the whole society. But it is questioning to think that part of civil society could result from a “public policy for organising women”. What about the real autonomy of feminist sectors and their real capacities to criticise or question the state?

When the initiative of the interaction comes from feminist NGOs, it consists mainly in offering their gender expertise in order to make the political world and the administration less gender blind, and to lobby in favour of women's rights. Two kinds of activities could open new perspectives in their relationship with SERNAM and the state in general. However, it seems that these activities have not been yet really put in practice. The first activity is about a better implication of feminist NGOs in the law-making process. The second one refers to the exercise of a citizen control on public action (law, governmental acts, courts decisions, etc.) (Valdés 2001). According to the opinion of some MPs and feminist leaders that I met in Chile, these two opportunities constitute an avenue to increase the quality of the Chilean democracy in general, in terms of gender equality and women's emancipation in particular.

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So, are the institutionalised feminist organisations political representatives? Conventionally, the activity of feminist NGOs (in Chile) is not considered as political representation. At best, it helps official (elected) political representatives, but NGOs are not considered as political representatives themselves. To my opinion, and according to feminist and performative points of view, the lesson from the Chilean case is that feminist NGOs can – and should – be considered as political representatives. Their representation would be performed outside, or beyond, the democratic criterion of election, authorisation and accountability. Institutionalised feminist organisations are critical actors for political representation as long as their claims of representation receive a symbolic recognition, material resources and/or access to negotiation and policy-making, from makers of representation such as public and/or political institutions (SERNAM, political parties, members of the Parliament or international cooperation agencies – whom I did not speak about in this paper). In this frame, notions of authorisation and accountability of representatives still have meaning even as they shift from the represented to the makers of representation.

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