

FEMINISM'S REVOLUTIONARY PROMISE ¹

FINDING HOPE IN HARD TIMES

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Being a socialist-feminist activist has never been easy. We occupy a stony ground between the popularity of liberal (and social-democratic) feminism's apparently practical reformism and the heady appeal of radical feminism's claim to a female moral/spiritual superiority. Especially in these not so very revolutionary times, to write about the meaning of revolutionary change from the point of view of socialist-feminism seems to be more an exercise in myth-making than analysis, more an expression of utopian hope than an outlining of political strategy. Ironically, just at the moment that socialist-feminists are trying to cope with what we experience as decline if not defeat of feminism, or at least of feminism as a grass-roots movement within which radicals could organize, some on the left are finding in feminism — and other 'new movements' — revolutionary subjects to replace the working-class.

Feminism certainly has much to contribute to expanding what marxism understands to be human liberation and to creating the kind of movement that could possibly bring it about. Feminism insists that we take as a field for theory and political intervention domains of social life that marxism has fundamentally ignored: sexuality, intimacy, raising children, the care and nurture of adults. In so doing, feminism has allowed us to think far more extensively than before about the material basis of socialism — about the best way to organize social life to 'make' socialist people and to foster relationships of equality and respect. In confronting the pain and rewards of motherhood in contemporary society, and in understanding mothering as a kind of work, feminism has allowed us to redefine what we mean by both alienated and unalienated labour. In revaluing those human capacities and activities that have been defined as belonging primarily to women, feminism has fundamentally challenged any vision of socialism that fails to re-integrate the dimensions of human life that capitalism has so radically separated. Feminist theory has helped to undermine the system that marxist theory had become: its economic reductionism, its productivism and uncritical approach to technology; its narrow definitions of work, worker, and working-class; its reification of the capitalist split between 'public' and 'private' and the privileging of the public as an arena for theoretical analysis

and political organization; its impoverished understandings of consciousness, particularly its inattention to the way that emotional needs shape political understandings, the relationship between gender identities and the construction of political and economic 'interests.' Feminism, in its theory and in its political practice has been a rich resource for the renewal of marxism — for recapturing and developing its radically democratic liberatory vision.

Feminist organizations have wrestled with questions that the marxist left rarely recognized: the tension between process and product, between leadership and inclusiveness, between building collectivity and encouraging critical debate, between creating consensus and appreciating differences, and so forth. Certainly, in our struggle to find 'pre-figurative' forms of organization, the feminist movement hasn't come to easy answers. Indeed, most of the questions feminism raises can only really be answered through a broad process of dialogue and experiment engaging the creativity and experience of many diverse communities of resistance. But if these tensions can't be easily resolved, confronting them has allowed feminism to develop ways of discussing, acting together and deciding (or deciding not to decide) that could help to counter the bureaucratic tendencies that have plagued left organizations, small and large.

The Contribution of 'New Movements'

Contemporary left critics² who draw inspiration from the 'new movements' and argue for a politics based on radical democracy rather than on class exploitation have identified a crucial question facing revolutionary socialists: how to move the demand for democratic participation and the struggle against forms of domination other than class from the margins of socialist politics.³

Further, while they aren't the only ones making this point, these critics are certainly right, I think, to argue on the one hand for the subversive potential of protests against domination, ecological destruction, nuclear annihilation, and on the other hand that a revolutionary socialist bloc is a political creation: no demand, including the demand for democratic participation, is necessarily subversive and any struggle can be articulated to an incorporationist project as well as a revolutionary one.

Laclau and Mouffe argue:

All struggles, whether those of workers or other political subjects, left to themselves, have a partial character, and can be articulated to very different discourses. It is this articulation which gives them their character. not the place from which they come. There is therefore no subject — nor, further, any 'necessity' — which is absolutely radical and irrecoverable by the dominant order, and which constitutes an absolutely guaranteed point of departure for a total transformation.'

Many of us would agree with their salutary focus on the political, on the constructed and contingent character of revolutionary consciousness. But what are the strategic conclusions to be drawn? Because there is no subject

which is necessarily radical, does that mean that revolutionary worldviews are as likely to be constructed and adopted by one social group as another? To be sure, needs and interests are socially and historically constructed and counter-hegemonic worldviews are part of this process. Radical discourses redefine needs and identify interests in ways that illuminate the interconnection of different needs and interests and link those needs and interests to a vision of transformed society. But worldviews are carried by groups who by their social location and experience, their everyday experience as well as their experience in reform movements, are more or less open to one set of ideas or another.

Moreover, the struggle against exploitation and the struggle against domination, ought not to be counterposed. If the new movements have shown us the importance of other dimensions of oppression and other identities as sources of radical protest, their evolution has also demonstrated how structures of capital accumulation, when unchallenged (either politically or economically), limit and distort these possibilities. While there are still some activist 'new movement' groups, in general the new movements have failed to extend their social base and, at least in the U.S., increasingly rely on strategies such as lobbying and providing expertise within existing political structures. Their move toward more conservative reform strategies cannot be explained simply by a failure of political imagination. The leaderships of these movements have responded to a political climate whose hostility to reform is definitely shaped by an international capitalist offensive against labour and the defeat and disorganization of the trade unions.

These pressures — and their political consequences — are quite clear in the successes and failures of feminism. A consideration of this one new movement perhaps can make clear the enduring necessity for socialist revolutionaries to base our politics (organizations, activities, as well as programme on the self-activity of those people we can broadly call the working-class.⁵

Feminism After the Second Wave

In the 1960's and 1970's feminism had an historic role to play as a 'cross-class' movement for democratic rights. For it is only in our time and through feminist organizing, that the bourgeois revolution has been completed and women have become not only citizens but also owners of their own person and truly free sellers of their own labour power. The entire edifice which legislated women's subservience in marriage, denied us control over our bodies and reproductive capacity, and legalized our economic marginalization has been substantially dismantled. This victory has helped to force a reorganization of the gender order — materially, culturally, politically. The terms of this reorganization are now a matter of contest. In this struggle, women face not only a reactionary right that romanticizes the patriarchal family but also a modernizing right which celebrates meritocratic values and individual choice, understood to reside in the market.

As its opponents are changing, so too is feminism. Feminism began as

a real social movement. The autonomous, grass-roots, local organizations which were the hallmark of second-wave feminism — and the locus of its creative genius — have been replaced by feminism as organized interest group. While feminists (in the broadest sense of advocates for women) have entered and begun to affect conservative as well as liberal and social-democratic parties, business and professional organizations as well as trade unions, the major contemporary inheritor of second-wave feminism is to be found in what I would call 'social welfare feminism' — a loose network of individuals and organizations inside and outside the state apparatus who seek to represent the interests of women, including working-class and racially oppressed women. Feminism in advanced capitalist countries today is much more a network of organizations for lobbying than for grass-roots organizing. The membership provides money, sometimes votes, sometimes letters and phone-calls, but very little local activism.

Like their counterparts in the trade unions, although perhaps even less organizationally tied to their social base than trade union officials and staff, the women who make their living one way or another as representatives of women's interests (what Australian feminists have called femocrats) have particularly strong connections to the political parties that have historically supported the expansion of the welfare state — the social-democratic parties (and the Democratic Party in the U.S.). While feminists have been able to wield considerable influence within these parties, and within their governments when in power, they have also been bounded by their dependence on these parties and the state apparatus, and by the vulnerability of their own organizations with their relatively weak social base. Thus, in general (and depending on the relative strength of the political parties to which they are tied) feminists have been pushed onto the defensive politically.

Where, then, lies feminism's transformative promise? I would argue that the same social, economic, and political changes that have led to the institutionalization of feminism and its cultural incorporation have created the possibility of a new kind of feminist organization — one based on the self-activity of working-class women. Rather than a cross-class movement for democratic rights, such a women's movement would be based in organizations of and for women which are allied to and part of other struggles and located organizationally within working-class movements, whether these are based in communities or workplaces. Such a movement would not necessarily be revolutionary — any more than trade unions or other working-class organizations are. Nonetheless, by both their structural position and experience working-class women are best placed to create and respond to a political practice that does go beyond reformism to bridge socialism and feminism. The realization of this potential depends in part on whether the revolutionary socialist left will embrace, in its vision of revolution and modes of organization, the insights and experience of feminist theory and practice.

The Impact of Increasing Class Divisions Among Women

As an organized self-conscious political movement feminism has been largely middle-class and white. Women of colour certainly made crucial contributions to feminist theory in their writing and to feminist politics in their community organizing. But only in the 1980's and mainly through the trade unions have working-class women become organized with a consciousness of their special capacities and needs. This is not to deny the participation of women workers, both unionized and not, such as teachers, in the feminist movement of the 1960's and 1970's, but only to argue that organized feminism remains overwhelmingly white and middle class.

In the 1960's and 1970's working class women (white women and women of colour) entered politics as members of families and communities. They were at the core of the civil rights, welfare rights, school integration, tenants, and other movements. In those struggles, women often transformed their consciousness, developed a sense of their personal effectiveness and their right to respect in personal and public life, learned to value women's leadership, and some even contested with men in their movements over programme, demands, strategy. But they did not, for the most part, identify their organizations and struggles with feminism or women's rights. They spoke as women of an oppressed class, or race, or community, while the feminist movement spoke of Woman.

This feminist movement, for its own part, made historic gains for women, including working class women. But working class women were not the major actors in making reform nor its primary beneficiaries. Feminist demands for equality have been culturally incorporated and institutionalized as the right to compete and to contract. Old assumptions about the natural basis of the sexual division of labour have been challenged. Women are free to negotiate relationships and parental responsibilities with men, to choose life-styles' and 'careers.' This new gender ideal reflects real changes, especially in the lives of middle class women who have the resources to negotiate the class and race-biased systems of education, cultural formation, employment, etc. Indeed, women have become more class divided — and it is even less the case today that a middle-class movement can speak for all women. ⁶ Although almost all working women have double responsibilities, either because they do not get equal participation from male partners or because they are single parents, women in managerial and professional work can find individual solutions to combining waged work and family care. Their higher incomes makes it possible to buy their way out of household responsibilities and especially to have quality childcare; they have more bargaining power as individuals to negotiate benefits like paid parental leave; they have more control over their job conditions, and thus more flexibility at work; their higher status jobs place them in less dangerous and vulnerable positions.?

The majority of women cannot achieve equality through individual solutions. Most crucially, so long as caring for other people is the private

responsibility of individual households, women will find it difficult to break out of the vicious cycle in which their relatively low wages reinforce the sexual division of labour within the family, and their domestic responsibilities disadvantage them in the labour market. In addition, for most women, single parenthood will continue to spell hardship and poverty. It is hardly surprising if many working-class women, even those who share feminist aspirations for respect and equality, feel very ambivalent about feminism. Women's increasing freedom seems to have come at the expense of decreasing protections — in a society of atomized individuals who regard each other as means to end, many women can only be the losers. The drudgery of a double day is hardly liberation; and identities realized in expanded consumption, in appropriating marketed lifestyles and images, can't fill our need for social recognition and effective participation.

However, the reforms necessary to promote most women's equal participation in work and public life and thus women's equality in personal life, have proven to be much more difficult to win than the legal and cultural changes that are the legacy of second wave feminism. As a movement for legal reform, feminism was able to make gains in the 1960's and 1970's without really taking on capitalist class power. That is not to say that it was easy to force managers to stop discriminating in hiring or to pay women and men equally for equal work, or to legalize abortion. Nor is it to say that these gains are even today uncontested. But a movement that was predominantly based in the middle class — educated women, students, affluent housewives, professional women — could still compel legislatures to pass anti-discrimination law, compel the police and the courts to enforce it.⁸

To change the situation of working-class women, however, will require a significant redistribution of resources. Working-class women require, at minimum, quality affordable childcare (and eldercare) and paid time off for parental responsibilities (including meeting children's educational and emotional as well as physical needs) and in the longer run, shorter work days — not only so that parents can enjoy relating to their children but also so that they have time in their lives for activities other than meeting responsibilities in paid work and domestic work. Most crucially, women need time for organizing a politics to rediscover, re-name, and combat women's oppression.

Yet, any substantial reorganization of social reproduction represents a serious claim on surplus wealth — and therefore runs up against the interests and demands of capital (expressed in both the power of individual employers and the resistance by the state to providing the material basis for women's equality). Even in relatively wealthy countries with strong social democratic parties, state provisions — family allowances, paid parental leave, state subsidized childcare — are still not extensive enough to undercut the logic of a sexual division of labour. One year paid parental leave, and a week or two's worth of paid family leave a year, makes doing two jobs easier, but

households still need lots of unpaid labour to sustain themselves. Responsibility for dependent people (children, the ill, the elderly, etc.) requires time, emotional effort and physical work from household members. While some women can demand equality of sacrifice from male partners or manage well alone, most end up in arrangements where they are the primary caregivers, achieving a decent living standard through the contributions of male partners whose greater income earning capacities underwrite their privileged primary 'breadwinner' status. Moreover, the scope of subsidies and government provisions is always constrained by the demands of capital accumulation — economic downturns lead to state cutbacks, often most severely in highly labour intensive areas of personal services and in those services that meet the needs of the least politically well-mobilized constituencies, in other words, in those services most important to women and especially mothers.⁹

I am not arguing that the persistence of the sexual division of labour in the occupational structure and in the household is simply the outcome of rational responses by men and women to material difficulties they face. Clearly, women's life goals, their desires for children, their sense of responsibility for elderly parents are socially shaped, and women enter into and stay in relationships with men for reasons other than economic survival. Further, had women not to contend with men's resistance, the possibilities for changing the sexual division of labour in the household or in the workplace would be much greater even within the limits set by the protection of capital accumulation and the privatization of social reproduction. Nonetheless, these structural limitations are important barriers to women's self-organization and points of resistance to feminist projects.

The Political Drift to the Right

Once we consider this point, it becomes easier to understand why a fundamentally minoritarian political movement, the new right, has been so successful a counter to feminism. The appearance of a right-wing opposition was only to be expected in reaction to feminism's challenging the traditional gender order. However, there is nothing inevitable about the right's capacity to define the terms of political discourse, to put feminism on the defensive, especially because most women reject the right's vision. Indeed, the right appears so influential not because it reflects majority sentiment but because there is no politics and no political organization that articulates a compelling alternative worldview. Without the capacity to construct personal dilemmas as political issues, feminism is necessarily on the defensive as it confronts an opposition whose political influence reaches far beyond its numbers. Rejecting a mainstream feminism that over-values male-defined success, accepts the competitive and hierarchical structures of capitalist society, uncritically supports the technocratic welfare state, yet repelled by the right's repressive moralism, most women have turned away from participation in organized political life. It is not only the pressures of everyday survival but

the barrenness of politics that pushes women to seek solutions in a perfected personal life.

Still, feminism remains very much alive, institutionalized in a vast network of organizations which together create a kind of 'woman's lobby.' Configurations reflect national political structures. In the U.S., this network includes organizations that are part of government at local and national levels — women's commissions and task forces, affirmative action offices, parts of the social welfare bureaucracy, etc.; traditional political organizations (e.g., the Congressional Women's Caucus, the National Women's Political Caucus, organizations within the Republican and Democratic Parties, the National Organization for Women); lobbies for almost every women's issue from welfare rights to tax reform to abortion; organizations who work in and around in the judicial system, primarily lending legal support to anti-discrimination and other hopefully precedent-setting cases. The lobby also includes groups that are not explicitly political, such as the official associations of predominantly women professions (social workers, librarians, nurses, etc.); women's caucuses and organizations of women in traditionally male professions; organizations of women trade union officials; organizations of social service providers, and so on. This women's lobby functions as a traditional political interest group aligned primarily with the Democratic Party.

Of course, political differences remain within mainstream feminism. The old style liberal feminism, focussed primarily on legislating equal treatment rather than expanding state services, unwilling to address class and race differences among women, is still quite powerful. Indeed, this brand of feminism has been increasingly incorporated into political discourses of the centre and all but the extreme right. The debate about whether mothers should work, whether children should be in day care, whether women ought to be able to compete with men in economic and political life, has been pretty much won by the 'feminist' side. The argument now is over whether the state should take responsibility for creating the conditions for 'equal opportunity' or whether that can all be left to the competitive incentives of the marketplace.¹⁰ In North America, for instance, the debate on childcare legislation revolves not around whether mothers should work, but how much the government should spend on daycare, and for whom, and whether the state should subsidize private providers (through vouchers or tax-credits, for instance) or develop public childcare.¹¹ Social-welfare feminists argue for state intervention and effort, and many have come to elaborate a politics that looks to the state for much more than anti-discrimination legislation and enforcement.¹² If not by their own experience, then through the lives of women they try to help and, perhaps most important, through pressure from organizations of trade union women and Black women, these social welfare feminists have organized campaigns for government intervention to help working-class women: e.g., paid parental leave, quality child care, subsidized health care, pay equity.

However, given a) the tremendous resistance in this decade to expanding government spending in general, b) the powerful industrial and regional interests who defend the current distribution of state funding, e.g., the military-industrial complex, and c) the much greater political resources of middle-class as compared to working-class/poor constituencies, most of these efforts have either been completely defeated or the legislation finally passed has benefited primarily middle-class women and had a negligible or in some cases even deleterious impact on working class and poor women.¹³ Moreover, facing these very powerful constraints, social welfare feminists (who because of their political worldview and structural location are in any case much more at home with legislating benefits for women than with helping women to organize themselves) have failed to expand their grass-roots activist base.

Without that kind of support, however, they have been especially vulnerable to pressures from the right. This is nowhere more visible than in the attempt to re-appropriate 'the family' from the right, primarily by recasting demands for expanded state benefits for women as a programme to strengthen the family.¹⁴ In the spring of 1988, for example, Representative Patricia Schroeder, co-chair of the U.S. Congressional Women's Caucus, organized a 'Great American Family Tour,' in which she and other speakers campaigned across the U.S. for parental leave, childcare, housing, and health care legislation. In conjunction with Schroeder's campaign, the Coalition of Labor Union Women organized a demonstration in Washington, D.C. on these same issues, calling the demonstration 'Celebrate the American Family: Working Together for Change.' This strategy has been especially disastrous in marginalizing the issue of compulsory heterosexuality on the feminist political agenda and thereby strengthening the influence of conservatives on issues such as abortion, teenage sexual rights, lesbian/gay rights, AIDS.¹⁵ Organizers of the CLUW demonstration refused to include gay/lesbian rights or abortion rights as family issues, would not accept speakers from organizations involved in those campaigns, and attempted to keep gay/lesbian organizations from displaying their literature at the rally.¹⁶ Demands for reform that increase women's sexual independence and that directly contest male domination in personal relationships cannot be so easily recast as 'really' programmes to improve the lives of children and men — which is what 'pro-family' politics is all about. Moreover, justifying benefits to women in this way further delegitimizes women's claim to autonomy, self-development, and individuality, undercutting the very ground on which the project of women's liberation has to rest.

From this analysis, the counterposition of feminism and marxism, of the feminist movement to the trade union movement, appears particularly absurd. Feminism as a mass reform struggle with radicalizing potential cannot be renewed on the basis of its old middle-class constituencies but depends on the rebuilding of working-class self-organization. By working-

class self-organization, I mean the collectively-structured process of engaging in resistance to and making demands on corporate capital, whether that is done directly (strikes) or indirectly (campaigns for government intervention), by people who do not exercise power in their daily working lives and who are situated economically so that they don't control very much of their own time on the job or off it. Without the capacity, *in practice*, to take on the limits set by the demands of capital accumulation in a period of increasing international competition, feminism will continue to be vitiated of its radical potential, capitulating to the right, and unable to mobilize broad layers of women.

The Self-Organization of Working-Class Women

The fate of feminism as an actual *movement*, then, is tied to the fate of trade unionism and other forms of collective resistance to corporate capital. If it was possible for 'new movements' to flourish in the 1960's and 1970's alongside an essentially bureaucratic and de-mobilized trade unionism, this is no longer the case. But the decline of the old trade union movement is not the end of the working-class, or of trade unions, as agents of social change. It is the exhaustion of a kind of unionism and a kind of industrial organization — the 'social contract unionism' based in heavy industry that became dominant after World War II. To confront an increasingly centralized and mobile capital, many organizers and activists look to a social and political unionism based in solidarities beyond the workplace — linkages with communities, across industries and sectors, etc.¹⁷ Obviously, one key strategic issue is how to rebuild involvement and organization at the base of a kind that can sustain militant resistance under conditions of an intense employers' offensive substantially underwritten by the state.

In this effort, working-class women can make a crucial contribution as organizers in communities and workplaces. Historically, trade union women, and perhaps especially Black trade union women, have fought for women's equality in their unions and in their workplaces; but so long as women were a minority within the workforce and therefore within the trade union movement, they could be marginalized. Mainstream feminism's success in legitimizing the ideal of equality and the massive entry of women into waged work have created the conditions for the development of a working-class feminism, one that integrates itself not only politically but organizationally with other movements of the exploited and oppressed.

The action and politics of working-class women in their trade union and community organizing have forced socialist-feminists to re-think our categories — even how we define 'feminist'. Are Black women organizing for better pre-natal health care, or for neighbourhood watches to prevent rape, doing feminist organizing, even if they locate themselves within the anti-racism movement and don't identify themselves as feminist? Are working women organizing for higher pay as family breadwinners feminists even if they define

themselves as trade unionists? Out of these activities, many working-class women activists become conscious of their oppression and of their need to organize as women *not in opposition to but in relation to their membership in unions or oppressed communities*.¹⁸ They must therefore find forms of organization and political expression that reject the practice and politics of both the traditional left and of feminism. Both movements have tended to find common ground by universalizing similarities ('we are all workers' `we are all women') without recognizing and incorporating differences, whether these be differences of gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. What the organizational forms might be, it's hard to say. One model, perhaps, would be a geographically based (local, regional, national) confederation of grass-roots women's groups based in unions, workplaces, communities, that are organized around certain projects and which bring women together frequently to socialize, make decisions, act.

At the moment, of course, organized working-class women are in the minority. Still, they represent a potential leadership, not only for a renewed feminism but for a renewed trade unionism, one that no longer concerns itself only with public issues and public life, that no longer narrows its scope to workplace/industrial as opposed to community/personal issues.¹⁹ Women's lives bridge, in ways that men's do not, the divide between work and community. Working-class women cannot create, as men have often done, a union culture that builds solidarity through exclusive bonds and loyalties and that regards families and communities to be auxiliary rather than central points of support and power.²⁰ Dependent on sharing networks of kin and neighbours to negotiate their double day, working-class women are likely to define independence in ways very different from men and to be less vulnerable than men to the bourgeois ideal of themselves as freely contracting citizen workers and independent wage earners. Finally, in their workplaces and occupations women are less racially segregated, than they are in terms of where they live. At work, white women and women of colour might find common ground as they discover that they share the experiences and dilemmas of meeting their obligations and interests not only as workers but also as kin, friends, members of communities.

Reform and Revolution

An effort to elaborate a socialist-feminist reform strategy for a working-class women's movement, to contest the emerging leadership of women politicians and trade union officials, to develop grass-roots organizations of working-class women that are prefigurative in their demands as well as in their organizational forms, should be at the centre of any discussion of revolutionary strategy in the late 20th century.

It may be that in the long run advanced capitalist societies could re-organize social reproduction in ways that would substantially decrease the burdens of care now carried by households and by women. But socialized

forms of care would still inevitably be delivered, like other welfare state services, in a class and race biased and highly bureaucratic system. Nonetheless, such an expansion of the welfare state would substantially underwrite further change in gender relations and gender ideology.²¹ In any case, it is certain that, while it may be possible for capitalism to absorb gender equality in the long run, significant shifts away from the privatization of social reproduction will have to be forced upon capital, in the same way as universal male suffrage, the recognition of trade unions or the welfare state were won through struggle. And women's struggles to create the material basis for gender equality has the potential to go far beyond its incorporationist ends. That potential lies in the movement itself — in its creation of aspirations that transcend any particular reform — and especially in the capacity of revolutionary socialists to deepen grass-roots organization and broaden the political understandings of women activists.

As a movement for equality and against male domination, feminism is not inevitably radical or socialist. Social-welfare feminism has a reform vision that can be very attractive to working-class women: a workplace attuned to family needs, a benevolent and expanded welfare state, and a democratized nuclear family. This vision is not contradictory to capitalism. It accepts the split between public and private in which the social relationships and culture of the workplace remain structured by hierarchy and competition. The mainstream feminist vision would reduce the penalties for losing and insure that women could fairly compete, but not change the essential organizational structures nor eliminate the labour market.²²

The social-welfare feminist vision contains little critique of the bureaucratic welfare state and maintains a liberal faith in the welfare state's ability to equalize the unequal. Childcare might become a general entitlement, like public education. But, as with public education, class and race inequalities will produce vast differences in the quality of care and in the capacity of parents to negotiate the system: both to ensure that their children's needs are met and to protect themselves from unwanted intrusions. The modernizing right's attack on the welfare state draws heavily on these legitimate concerns.

Reforms that expand state supports for family households (subsidies to family care-givers, tax credits for childcare costs, etc.) assume that they will continue to be the primary units for providing care. While such policies might help the family (at least more families) better deliver on its promise of fulfillment and self-expression, they pose no challenge to the individualism and alienation that defines our experience of public life in advanced capitalist societies. They thus reinforce the existing cynicism about the possibilities for participatory democratic alternatives.²³

In order to address the central dilemmas in working class women's lives — and in particular the felt counterposition between autonomy and collectivity, between freedom and security, between self-development and nurturance — we have to not only project an attractive socialist vision but also develop a

strategy for reform that transcends rather than capitulates to existing political worldviews. This strategy has to include, first, a reform programme which is self-conscious about the changes called for, the language in which we justify our claims, and the necessity to link always short-run goals to visions of a radically re-organized society. Second, the strategy has to support and try to bring into being political organization and institutional reforms that allow individuals to develop and control collectively their own objectives and activities, to increase their personal capacities and to enhance their sense that even larger changes would be possible if they joined their efforts with those of others. Commitments to a radically democratic and participatory society can more easily be built out of some practices than out of others.

Once we focus on this issue, however, the importance of revising marxist theory to integrate socialist-feminist analysis also comes to the fore. Marxist politics, even in its most democratic and visionary tradition, does not speak to the key contradictions of women's everyday lives. Just think, for example, how much time the democratic socialist tradition in marxist politics has spent debating workplace democracy, planning and participation, addressing issues such as how to combine expertise with workers' control of production, authority with democracy. But hardly a word has been spoken on the problems of organizing social reproduction, the renewal of life daily and intergenerationally.

How, for example, do we provide security and continuity for children without replicating the intense, exclusive relationships of the nuclear family? We know that women and children need to be liberated from each other. But, once we recognize that motherhood is not only oppressive but also a kind of skilled work and that parents derive pleasure from children, what implications does that have for how we organize participation in other work, in production? Does creative work require complete freedom from the obligations and restraints that caring for someone else necessarily entails? Finally, how can we organize collectivities in a way that reduces, if not ends, the tension between self-development and collective obligation? Ignored by marxists, such questions have been extensively explored in socialist-feminist writing and politics.

In response to the right's romanticized evocation of *'the family,'* socialist-feminists have argued for a strategy of 'deconstruction.' Kinship, love, and good things to eat tend to go together in our society, but that's not inevitable. How then do we want to 'deconstruct' the family? Should households continue to take responsibility for children and the daily physical needs of adults, or should we meet more of our needs outside the place where we sleep and enjoy privacy? How might we differently arrange living spaces? What kinds of bonds will connect people who share them? Where will children live and how might they be cared for? Can we find inspiration in the open and fluid networks of adults and children cooperating across households that constitute the survival strategies of the very poor?

There is no feminist agreement on these issues, no socialist-feminist orthodoxy to be absorbed into marxism.²⁴ But these debates have to be considered central questions on which any good marxist must be well-educated — as well-educated as on debates in political economy. This is not only because socialist-feminist theory allows us to present a much richer and broader vision of what socialism might be. It is also because socialist feminists have been concerned with whole areas of human experience in capitalism that marxism never really considered as a field for political action — sexuality, intimacy, motherhood, gender identity. Moreover, socialist-feminist analysis has demonstrated the profound impact of gender relationships, gender identity, and gender ideology on Marxism's traditional territory — trade unionism, parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics, state policy. In defending feminist gains against the attack from the right, socialist feminists have been forced to confront, to analyze, and to try to respond to the powerful relationship between sexuality, gender identity, and political commitments and worldviews. In identifying the longings and anxieties on which anti-feminism draws, socialist-feminism has strengthened marxist analysis of conservative politics and laid the ground for a more effective response.

Crafted differently depending on the issue, this strategy might follow some general guidelines. Today women (and men) are forced to sacrifice one human need in order to fulfill another. Our politics ought to centre on concrete reforms which allow people to get beyond these dilemmas. Further, the reforms we propose and the way we organize for them (the kinds of movements we build) ought to prefigure the social/personal relationships and reordered priorities we want to achieve through socialist revolution.

First, we need to reappropriate the issue of control from the right — which has so effectively counterposed the market and the family (as arenas subject to individual control) to the welfare state. Instead of simply defending existing services, we should be proposing democratically run (worker and client controlled), de-centralized and collective alternatives to the unpaid domestic work of women. For example, working-class mothers have good reason to feel reluctant about turning their children, or their elder parents, over to the expert domination of the bureaucratic welfare state or to the exploitative profiteering of the marketplace. Women from oppressed racial/ethnic communities have every reason to regard with suspicion institutions that systematically deny the value of their culture, suppress their history, and undermine their children's self-regard. On the other hand, neighbourhood childcare centres cooperatively run by parents and workers support and require participation and involvement. In addition to building the experience of democratic participation into individuals' everyday lives, they could be one base for collective action, e.g., to join with other centres to increase funding.

Second, we need to reappropriate the issue of choice. In the liberal lexicon, choice is only guaranteed negatively — i.e., as the right to act without interference. For affluent middle class women, negative freedom may be

sufficient. But working-class women need much more. We ought to define choice positively — i.e., as the right to have good alternatives to choose from. And we want to make sure that good choices for some women don't rest on the exploitation of others — as domestic servants, low-paid childcare workers, fetal incubators, test cases for new contraceptives or whatever.

Third, we need to integrate women's right to autonomy, self-knowledge, and self-development into every argument for reform. We can make this claim, first, on the ground simply of our humanity but second on the ground that it will make for better communities. We should avoid any temptation, for example, to defend women's access to decent jobs or living wages only on the ground of their family obligations — their husbands don't make enough, they have no husbands, therefore they 'need' to work. Liberals define autonomy in the language of contracts and limited liability, while conservatives invoke the values of interdependence and long-term commitments within the confines of traditional community. Our goal is not to 'free' women from commitment and obligation, but to insure that we enter those compacts from a position of equal access with men to economic survival and political power.

Fourth, we have to contest the marginalization of sexual politics from the feminist agenda, and most particularly, the defensive silence on abortion and lesbianism. These issues raise, more directly than almost any other, men's anxiety about losing the love and care of women and raise women's fears of evoking these anxieties in men. They also challenge, perhaps most deeply, women's gender identities. Rather than ignoring them, because they make people uncomfortable, we can discuss them in the context of arguments for giving women choice and control. For example, we locate abortion within a broader constellation of 'reproductive rights' which create the conditions for women to control our reproductive lives — to choose to be as well as not to be mothers. We include, along with adequate housing, a living wage, adequate parental leave, shorter workdays with no loss in pay, etc. the freedom to express sexual preference. Women can't be said to choose to share parenting with a man until women are free to raise children by themselves or with another woman. The value of freely chosen relationships, the wish to give and receive sexual intimacy by desire, not by constraint, are values women hold deeply, often without ever questioning how compulsory heterosexuality denies them.

Finally, we have to become far more self-conscious about creating prefigurative political relationships and political cultures in our grass-roots organizing and in socialist groups. Socialist-feminism has struggled with concerns about political organization that traditional marxism considered long since settled. To name a few: what modes of decision-making will include the less knowledgeable, less experienced, and less assertive in equal participation? What kinds of leadership will generate thoughtful self-activity and discourage passivity? Which of their needs and to what extent should

members expect an organization to meet? Are some kinds of organizational structure and political actions more likely to encourage members to become more confident and more capable? What goals should we use to measure success? These questions are so familiar they would hardly bear repeating, were it not for the fact that they are still largely disregarded on the left.

There has been considerable experimentation with modes of group organization, decision-making structures such as consensus, forms of political education, efforts to create non-hierarchical political communities. Much of this has occurred in the eco-feminist, radical-, spiritual- and anarcho-feminist, and direct-action peace movements.²⁵ Many of their techniques could be translated into revolutionary socialist organizations, particularly at the local level.²⁶ Of course, there is no perfected feminist process that will resolve all our organizational dilemmas. But to recognize that these dilemmas exist and to commit ourselves to exploring solutions is absolutely essential. That political organizations of the Left have been so resistant to this project, perhaps more than anything else, is an indication of how far we have yet to travel.

NOTES

1. I'd like to thank Jan Haaken, Nancy Holmstrom, Alan Hunter, Leo Panitch and Bill Resnick for their thoughtful comments. Although I couldn't respond to all of their suggestions, the article has been much improved by their critiques.
2. For instance, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).
3. Thoughtful critiques by Ellen Wood, Alan Hunter and Norman Geras have delineated most of the problematic aspects of these works. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat From Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986); Alan Hunter, 'Post-Marxism and the New Social Movements,' *Theory and Society*, forthcoming; Norman Geras, 'Post-Marxism?', *New Left Review*, no. 163 (May/June, 1987).
4. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. 169 — 170.
5. Because the definition of working-class is so contested these days, one can't assume a commonly held meaning. For purposes of this article, I'm using the term middle class as a catch-all to include groups often defined as 'new middle class', such as higher salaried professionals, middle to upper managers, and the old middle class of the self-employed and small businessmen/women. By working class, I mean all other wage and salary workers.
6. On this point for England, see Elizabeth Wilson, 'Thatcherism and Women: After Seven Years,' *Socialist Register: 1987*, eds. Ralph Miliband, Leo Panitch and John Saville (London: Merlin Press, 1987).
7. While sexual violence — sexual harassment, rape, wife-beating — is a cross-class and cross-race phenomenon, nevertheless, income, occupation, age, and race certainly differentiate women's vulnerability.
8. Some of these programmes, of course, were severely eroded under the conservative governments of Reagan and Thatcher — especially enforcement of anti-discrimination policy in education and employment. Still, overall, even under conservative regimes, the movement of women into management and

the professions has continued, while in areas such as changing local police and court practices in cases of rape and domestic violence there has been marked improvement, at least in the U.S.

9. On the impact of welfare state cutbacks on women, see Jennifer G. Schirmer, *The Limits of Reform: Women, Capital and Welfare* (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1982), pp. 133-135; H. Heclø and H. Madsen, *Policy and Politics in Sweden* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), pp. 165-173; Borchorst, A and B. Slim, 'Women and the Advanced Welfare State — A New Kind of Patriarchal Power?' in A. Showstack Sassoon, ed., *Women and the State: The Shifting Boundaries of Public and Private* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women* (Boston: South End Press, 1988); Anna Yeatman, *Feminists, Femocrats, Technocrats: Essays on the Contemporary Australian State*, Chapter 7 (Allen & Unwin, forthcoming). I am very grateful to Anna Yeatman for sharing her manuscript with me.
10. For an excellent analysis of Thatcherism's 'modernizing' gender ideology, see Wilson, 'Thatcherism and Women: After Seven Years.'
11. On Canada, see Jane Stinson, 'Window On The North: Women's Issues and Labour in Canada,' *Labor Research Review* no. 11 (Spring, 1988), pp. 46-47. On the U.S. see the comparison of Democratic and Republican party platforms on childcare in *Ms.* (October, 1986).
12. Political/state structures have very much shaped the strategic issues facing 'social-welfare' feminist organization and politics. As both Siim and Hernes point out, in the Scandinavian countries with highly corporatist systems, all parties have assumed that the state has a responsibility to help women cope with a 'double day,' but feminists (and women generally) have been marginal to the centralized decision-making structures within which state policy is crafted. Berte Siim, 'The Scandinavian Welfare States — Towards Sexual Equality or a New Kind of Male Domination,' *Acta Sociologica* v. 30, nos. 3/4, pp. 255-270; H. Hernes, 'Women and the Advanced Welfare State — the Transition from Private to Public Dependence,' in H. Holter, ed. *Patriarchy in a Welfare State* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1984).
13. For example, Child Support Enforcement has been the only major legislation coming out of the 'feminization of poverty campaign,' which sought a broad range of programmes: childcare, increased services and income for elderly women, increased access to quality health care for women and children, etc. Whatever their impact on increasing the collection of support awards from affluent men (and the evidence is mixed at best) these laws have led to increased harassment of women welfare recipients without any improvement in their level of income. See, Wendy Sarvasy and Judith Van Allen, 'Fighting the Feminization of Poverty: Socialist-Feminist Analysis and Strategy,' *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 16 (4), 1984, pp. 89-110.
14. See, for instance, Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (New York: Summit Books, 1981) and Jean Bethke Elstain, 'Feminism, Family, and Community,' *Dissent* (Fall, 1982).
15. For an analysis of how this political adaptation undercuts the organization of poor Black women, see Barbara Omolade, *It's A Family Affair: The Real Lives of Black Single Mothers*, (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986).
16. Although the 1984 CLUW Convention reaffirmed support for women's reproductive freedom, the CLUW leadership obviously may choose when to publicly endorse reproductive rights. An organization of women trade unionists working within the structures of the AFL-CIO, CLUW is one of the most integrated women's organizations: 50% of its leadership and membership are women of colour. Although it has/had tremendous potential for mobilizing rank and file

trade union women, CLUW is today, for the most part, little different from the highly bureaucratized union organizations of which it is a part. For a history of CLUW, see Diane Balsler, *Sisterhood and Solidarity* (Boston: South End Press, 1987).

17. For a discussion of alternatives based on recent U.S. experience see, 'Dare to Struggle: Lessons from P-9,' Phil Kwik and Kim Moody, 'Watsonville: A Mexican Community on Strike,' Frank Bardacke, 'Keeping GM Van Nuys Open,' Eric Mann all in *Reshaping the U.S. Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980's*, eds. Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker (New York: Verso, 1988).
18. The grass-roots organizing of women within the Nicaraguan agricultural workers' union (ATC) is one example. In addition to increasing the education and involvement of women in the union, and putting demands like paid maternity leave on the bargaining agenda, this project has sent delegates to national women's conferences and to international meetings. At the request of the Nicaraguan women, feminists in Spain are mobilizing to send spanish language pamphlets about contraception, contraceptives and instruments for performing abortion to women in the ATC. (Personal communication from Norma Chinchilla). On the potential and problems of working-class and peasant women in the Nicaraguan revolution, see Maxine Molyneaux, 'Mobilization Without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua,' *Feminist Studies*, v. 7, no. 2 (Summer, 1985).
19. For some examples of women's impact on the trade union movement in the U.S. and Canada see, *Feminizing Unions: Labor Research Review*, no. 11 (Spring 1988). For an instance of the impact of women's networks on workplace organizing, see Karen Brodtkin Sacks, *Caring By the Hour* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
20. I wouldn't deny the historical importance of community ties — friendship, kinship, neighbourhood — to men's trade union militancy. But I would argue that these reinforcing ties outside the workplace and the union hall were both in practice and subjectively created in a separate and exclusive male sphere.
21. Some feminists, drawing on the experience of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, are sceptical that providing more social supports to working women will have much impact on gender inequality. This is an issue that can't be settled here. But I would make three general points: 1) these societies in fact are still very far from freeing households substantially from the burdens of providing for their members; 2) the lack of political freedom in general tremendously inhibits the self-organization of women; 3) the bureaucratic and coercive character of public life leads to a romanticization of family and private life as domains of freedom, undermining women's aspirations for alternatives to traditional gender roles.
22. For an elaboration of this point, see my article, 'Feminist Political Discourses: Radical versus Liberal Approaches to the Feminization of Poverty and Comparable Worth,' *Gender & Society* v. 1, no. 4 (December, 1987), pp. 447-465.
23. On this point, see especially, Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, (London: Verso, 1984), Chapter IV.
24. See, for example, Barrett & McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*; Judith Stacey, 'Should the Family Perish?', *Socialist Review* 14, 2(March—April 1984); Martha A. Ackelsberg, 'Sisters or Comrades? The Politics of Friends and Families,' in Diamond, ed., *Families, Politics, and Public Policy*, (New York: Longman, 1983), Johanna Brenner and Nancy Holmstrom, 'Autonomy, Community, Women's Rights,' *The Year Left: Volume I*, eds. Mike Davis et al., (London: Verso, 1985); Denise Riley, 'The Serious Burdens of Love?: Some Questions on Childcare, Feminism and Socialism,' in Lynne Segal, ed. *What Is To Be Done About the Family?* (London: Penguin, 1983).

25. Although, for an inspiring example from the revolutionary socialist left, see 'City Life: Lessons of the First Five Years,' Kathy McAfee, *Radical America*, v. 13, no. 1 (January/February 1979).
26. See, for example, Michel Avery, Brian Auvine, Barbara Streibel, Lonnie Weiss, *Building United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Decision-Making*, (Madison, Wisconsin: Center for Conflict Resolution, 1981). Other techniques and modes of organization might not translate so well from one kind of movement to another. For instance, where the 'group' is locally based, even if it is large, some forms of decision making might work better than where the group is geographically dispersed (compare, for example, the possibilities at Greenham Common and those in the miners' strike). For other considerations along these lines, see Barbara Epstein, 'The Politics of Pre-Figurative Community: The Non-Violent Direct Action Peace Movement,' *Reshaping the U.S. Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980's*, eds. Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1988).