Feminist Political Economy: An Introduction

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This issue is about feminist praxis; about the theoretical assumptions that are reflected in women’s struggles to improve their conditions and about the implications of these activities for theory. In the early stages of post-war feminism, there was a tendency to think of women as passive victims of their bodies, of their ideas, of men or of capitalism. Increasingly, however, feminists have been recovering the history of women’s collective and individual efforts to transform their lives and have been re-examining the strategies of the modern women’s movement. In the process, feminists have become more aware of the contradictory nature of their struggles and of the different consequences for women in different classes, in different racial and ethnic groups and in different regions of the country and of the world.

In our view, class has to be reconceptualized through race and gender within regional, national, and international contexts. The static categorizing of class that has been used in so much of class analysis does not capture the experience of gender, race/ethnicity or class. Class is dynamic and relational; it is the basis of change. Gender, race/ethnicity and regionality/nationality interact with class in various ways with one being more salient than another at different points in time. The problem for socialist feminism is to develop a theoretical account of these different types of oppression and the relations between them with a view to ending them all. To end the subordination of women, we need theory,
research and action. Theory guides our research and action, and research and action provide the basis for our theorizing.

Research then, can be much more than an uncovering of evidence indicating women’s active participation in collective action or a documenting of women’s current successes and failures. Research can be a central component in praxis, providing a guide to, and a reflection on action. Research can make more transparent why, under what conditions, with whom, for what purposes, and with what consequences individual women join with others to struggle for change. Indeed, by definition, feminist research is motivated by strategic concerns.

Papers in this issue illustrate this process and these concerns. Some papers challenge existing theories and concepts and suggest new approaches to theory and research rooted in women’s experiences. Others mainly focus on action and its relationship to theory. All of the papers are concerned with understanding the way in which women experience the intersection of class, gender, race/ethnicity and regionality/nationality and the way in which women have acted or potentially could act to make their own history. They reveal the complex and often contradictory processes that provide the basis for action, raising clues for a more systematic understanding of how gender, class, race/ethnicity, region/nation and ideology intersect. For some, the variety of experiences described in these pages will reinforce the argument that a comprehensive theory is neither possible not desirable. For us, it indicates the need to start with different questions and to reconstruct our notions of class. There is a common thread to these articles. They all point to the need for an analysis that looks at the historically and regionally specific conditions, in and out of the household, that encourage people to join together around particular issues and on the basis of different types of shared relations at different times.

What is clear is that the political economy sets the stage for class and gender relations. Class, however, cannot be understood simply in terms of production relations or gender relations. While classes are always to some extent divided by gender, whether or not women will unite with men will
depend on the issue as well as on the current conditions, on the time and the place. Whether or not race and ethnic relations assume dominance also depends on the issue, on the conditions, on the time and place. The central questions are concerned, then, with the various configurations of gender, class and race which form the basis for action under specific regional or national political, economic and cultural conditions. The articles collected here address these questions.

Dorothy Smith argues that contemporary political economy accepts the standpoint of the 'relations of ruling' and, as a result, its agenda is set by the 'main business' of a capitalist economy. The standpoint of the 'relations of ruling' objectifies society, social relations, and people's experiences. In accepting this standpoint, political economy participates in this objectification. Political economists in their analysis of class create categories without any subjects and without any historical trajectory. Marx and Engels, on the other hand, located subjects in a moment of history and in the process of class struggle. Although political economy recognizes class as gendered, much of women's lives becomes invisible from the standpoint of the relations of ruling, where the point of production is treated as the exclusive site of class and class struggle. Just as women are marginal to the 'main business' so are they marginal to the concerns of political economic analysis. The task, as Smith sees it, is to shift to standpoints where women's experience becomes visible and where their experience is not objectified, that is, standpoints outside the 'relations of ruling.' She argues that we need a political economy that analyses how our lives are caught up in the historical, political and economic process, one that recognizes the multiple sites of experience in contemporary capitalism, and one that does not objectify these experiences. In this kind of analysis the concept of class becomes essential as a method of analysing the organization of relations in which women's lives and struggles are embedded.

Martha MacDonald and Pat Connelly also argue that class must be understood in an historical context, one that includes gender and household dynamics. They ask: How
do we go beyond a class analysis of women to a gendered class analysis? How do we move from the theoretical recognition that a gendered class analysis is necessary, to conducting research that will help us better understand our potential for political struggle? With these questions in mind, they analyse data from their research in six fishing communities in Nova Scotia. Most contemporary Marxist analyses classify genderless individuals into class positions at one point in time, and then consider the likelihood of class consciousness and struggle for those in particular positions. MacDonald and Connelly, however, examine the work histories of specific women and men, showing the complexity of their class position over the lifecycle. They examine family household work patterns and argue that people in the fishing communities experience class not just as individuals but as members of household units containing unequal gender relations. Households develop strategies for labour allocation and workplace struggle based on combined household class positions and unequal gender relations inside and outside the home. MacDonald and Connelly then apply this approach in case studies of two communities, showing how women and men experienced the political and economic changes in the fishing industry. They conclude that using a gendered class analysis, one that applies a dynamic concept of class which includes gender relations and the household, makes better sense of the class identification and political struggles within the communities than does the traditional class analysis.

Rosemary Warskett draws on her years in the union movement in reviewing Graham Lowe's book *Women in the Administrative Revolution*. While she applauds Lowe for focusing on women clerical workers she feels that his analysis falls short of providing a real understanding of the subordination of women clerical workers and their position in the class structure. The problem, as Warskett sees it, is in Lowe's conception of class and gender. Lowe defines class in terms of statistical categories based on the socio-economic background of individuals. He defines gender relations in terms of gender ideology which in his analysis becomes merely sexist attitudes. Although Lowe claims that
his approach is historical and dynamic, Warskett questions whether it is possible to construct a dynamic, analytical conception of class and gender by simply classifying individual backgrounds and by ignoring the role that the bearers of gender ideology play in class relations. Warskett argues that in Lowe's study, gender and class are not seen as constructed together and dynamically embodied in the social relations of production and reproduction, instead they remain independent concepts explaining socio-economic status on the one hand and sexist attitudes on the other. Like Smith, and MacDonald and Connelly, Warskett calls for a theoretical approach which comprehends the importance of agency and identity as well as structures in the process of historical change, one that first makes visible, and then examines the experiences of women clerical workers as they confront the material conditions and contradictions of their social reality.

Meg Luxton and Sue Findlay review Dorothy Smith's book, The Everyday World As Problematic in order to explore how her method of inquiry informs feminist practice and contributes to feminist theory and research. After reviewing the articles in the book and acknowledging the importance of Smith's scholarship and its influence in the feminist community, Luxton and Findlay discuss some of the difficulties encountered in attempting to use her work in their own practice and research. They discuss the accessibility of the language in Smith's writings, her use of the term "standpoint of women," and her view of the relationship between the women's movement and the state. Luxton, in particular, is concerned about whether and to what extent Smith's method, especially her critique of objectivity and her alternative of creating an "insiders" sociology, represents an innovation. Both Luxton and Findlay raise questions about Smith's method for understanding women's subjectivity. Overall, Luxton and Findlay's review leads them to mixed conclusions about Smith's method of inquiry and its contribution to theory, research and practice.

For Madeleine Parent, class, gender and ethnicity/race were constantly intertwined concerns and her early experiences ensured her lifelong commitment to struggle for
equality in these areas. Prevented from attending the all male undergraduate programs at the French universities controlled by the Catholic Church, Parent attended the English university, McGill. Here, in a male dominated and privileged milieu, she fought for scholarships for poor women as well as poor men students. As a member of the French minority on the McGill campus, prejudice became part of her experience. From university she joined the union movement, where she put great effort into involving women, identifying problems specific to women and making women's contributions to the unions visible. In discussing her years of union activity, Parent describes unions that provided support for women and unions that did not; historical periods that encouraged the involvement of women and times that did not; state intervention that restricted possibilities for women and state policies that created the conditions for women's active involvement in both paid employment and struggle; men who accepted women as fellow workers and men who did not. Although she is firmly convinced women should not develop separate unions, she is equally convinced that all unions need women's committees that bring women together to share their problems and unite them in their demands. In discussing her activities in the women's movement, Parent describes the tensions involved in representing a broad spectrum of women; working class as well as professional women; visible minorities as well as anglophone and francophone white women; differently abled as well as able women; rural as well as urban women; women in all regions and nations. Parent argues that the women's movement and the union movement must work as democratic organizations in social solidarity with other democratic organizations to recognize and defend the particular concerns of women and of racial/ethnic minorities. Parent draws on her years of experience in emphasizing the importance of both alliances and flexibility in the strategies we adopt in our pursuit of equality.

Ruth Frager's research suggests that, while Madeleine Parent was becoming an active feminist in Montreal during the 1930s, conditions in the Toronto garment industry prevented Jewish women from organizing around their
specific concerns, in spite of their inferior wages and jobs. A relatively small and geographically isolated group of Jewish garment workers faced anti-semitism, a monolithic anglo-saxon majority and unstable employment. This combination of factors encouraged them to unite as Jews and as workers. At the same time, the segregation of women’s work and women’s domestic responsibilities, and an ideology which stressed the importance of the family and the legitimacy of male dominance discouraged women from uniting around women’s issues. While francophones like Parent were organizing on the basis of ethnicity and gender, separate Jewish communities were deemed essential to union operations and separate women’s committees were denounced as divisive for the class struggle. Moreover, according to Frager, the women’s movement of the time offered little support to the women employed in the garment industries. Frager’s research suggests that specific historical conditions may encourage the dominance of ethnicity and class over gender as the basis for action. It also suggests that separate organizations based on relations other than those of class may be effective in achieving certain ends. However, her research implies as well that such strategies, which do not take women’s specific concerns into account, have contradictory results for women.

Looking at a somewhat later period, Susan Prentice recounts women’s collective response to the attempts to close the publicly funded daycare centres that had been opened during the Second World War. Issue oriented and uniting a broad range of women, the various actions organized to retain these services were coordinated by the Communist Party and supported by their members in a variety of government positions. These efforts were effective in the immediate postwar years, but the ideology of the cold war, combined with state strategies designed to undermine daycares through technical regulations and structural means, eventually served to counteract these victories. Like Parent, Prentice’s approach suggests that different alliances can be effective under different circumstances and that strategies focused on what are defined as women’s issues can be an important basis for change. Her research
indicates the complex nature of state policies, demonstrating that appeals to the state can be useful but that these gains are under constant threat as the state strives to maintain both the ideological and material conditions for creating profit. It also suggests that struggles on women’s issues can be undermined by those based predominantly on class.

The focus of Linda Briskin’s article is also women’s collective response but she is concerned with the modern women’s movement. Starting from what she calls the “standpoint of strategic practice,” she uses the concepts of mainstreaming and disengagement to analyse the effectiveness of feminist practice in Canada. Instead of beginning with a distinction among the various currents in feminism, Briskin examines how the different forms of feminist practice interact within the common context of the Canadian political economy. While Briskin argues that both mainstreaming and disengagement “are necessary to the feminist vision,” she contends that the goal is to maintain “an effective tension between the two,” avoiding the tendency to depend on either strategy. Unlike the radical feminists who tend towards disengagement and the liberal feminists who are much more sympathetic to mainstreaming, socialist feminists have combined strategies, sometimes favouring one, sometimes the other. Although this approach has its own contradictions, Briskin’s analysis suggests that Canadian socialist feminist practice has been more effective than that of either the British or the Americans in making gains for women, precisely because it has varied the strategy depending on the time, place, issue and membership, and because it has tried to accommodate difference.

Her analysis has important implications for our theoretical understanding of the basis for action, for it implies that no single strategy and no strategy that assumes the constant dominance of class, gender or race in all situations will be effective. Instead, as we have argued above, we need a theoretical framework that comprehends class, gender, and race and provides us with tools that help us figure out which will be the salient force under specific historical conditions and in specific situations. The articles in this issue provide tantalizing clues as to how this can be accomplished.