Socialist Feminism: From the Standpoint of Practice

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Introduction Women’s organizing in Canada in the last twenty years has netted some significant gains. Perhaps the 1988 Supreme Court decision declaring the abortion law unconstitutional is the most striking, but a balance sheet would also include other legislative gains in the areas of equal pay, affirmative action, sexual assault, family law and sexual harassment. Increases in women’s union activism and the concomitant change in union ideology have begun to reshape the labour movement. Changes in state practices concerning spousal relations and police intervention in cases of wife abuse, in educational practices surrounding sex role stereotypes and career counselling, in cultural and media practices with respect to the images of women—all combine to highlight the reconstitution of the sex/gender reality.

Despite these successes, women continue to confront attacks on these gains from the new right, conservative economic policies, the feminization of poverty, inequality in wages and job opportunities, escalating family and street violence, expansion of the pornography industry, and resistance to change embedded in the structures of unions and political parties. This list is far from complete. Furthermore, continuing public discomfort with ‘feminism,’ and, more importantly, the on-going invisibility of the more radical vision of women’s liberation, calling for major social and
economic transformation, reminds us of the distance yet to be travelled.

Lynne Segal in *Is the Future Female?* identifies a growing pessimism among British feminists about the possibilities of making change, a pessimism fueled both by the limited gains of the last twenty years, and the fragmentation of the women's movement.¹ This pessimism has resulted in a tendency to seek a recreated sisterhood based on "the timeless truths of women's lives"² and in a strategic orientation away from, economic and social change. The presence of a reconstituted radical or cultural feminism, although not as sharply felt in Canada given the hegemony of liberal feminism, is nonetheless part of what socialist feminists confront in our struggle to make change.

In this context, for the more radical vision of women's liberation to be strengthened, socialist feminism must emerge as a named politic in the public consciousness. As part of this process, we need a better understanding of the politics of socialist feminism, its unique strategic contribution and the organizational dilemmas it faces. This article makes a contribution to developing this clarity. The first part examines the categories through which the variety of feminisms have traditionally been explored—the political currents and the politics of identity—and both their contribution to, and limitations in, assessing and developing political strategy. The second part introduces a model of feminist practice situated within the activist map of the women's movement. Such a model uncovers the difficulties faced by feminists and identifies the potential resolution that is embedded in socialist feminism. The final section uses the model of feminist practice to highlight the organizational dilemmas that face socialist feminists in the Canadian context.

**Differentiating Between Feminisms** Feminism is not a unitary discourse or a unitary practice. Feminist theorists and activists generally distinguish between feminisms on the basis of long standing political traditions, out of which emerge what are often called the currents of feminism: liberal feminism, radical feminism and socialist feminism.
Although internationally these particular terms are not used consistently, feminists have categorized feminisms in similar ways. Increasingly, feminists are also identifying themselves through what might be called the "politics of identity": for instance as a woman of colour, or a Jewish lesbian. Both of these approaches have been significant to the development of feminism; each reflects, however, a weakness in our theorizing of feminist practice.

Organizing our understanding of feminisms through the political currents has been quite useful. Alison Jaggar's *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* has made an important contribution to this discussion in North America. Jaggar systematically locates the roots of contemporary currents of feminism inside of the mainstream political traditions. In so doing, she reveals the underlying assumptions about human nature and about the possibilities for change that are embedded in different feminisms.

Understanding feminism through the categories of the currents, however, is not unproblematic. In the first place, such an approach reifies these categories, implying a rigid separation between them and suggesting an internal coherence to each which, in fact, is only possible at fairly abstract levels of analysis. It also suggests that each current has a clear institutional base and a practice that can be clearly differentiated from the other.

The sharp-edged clarity possible at an abstract level of analysis often becomes opaque when confronted by the complexities of daily political activity. Decisions to plan a demonstration, to build a certain alliance, to argue for a specific demand rarely emerge directly from theoretical constructs. In the 'real' world of politics, socialist feminists may disagree with each other as often as they agree, both in theory and in practice, though all feminists certainly agree more than they disagree (sometimes our rancorous interactions make this difficult to remember). Not only do all feminists agree about many basic demands for women, they also actively organize together and build alliances. Analysing feminisms through the categories of the currents obscures this process of joint political struggle for women's liberation. In practice, then, the threads and currents of
feminism blur, as it shifts and adapts to concrete political conditions. In practice, there are complex patterns of alliances and coalitions. It is not surprising that practice conforms to theoretical distinctions only to a degree. In contrast to a self-identification based on political currents, feminists have increasingly been defining themselves with reference to race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, and/or particular experiences such as being on family benefits, for example, as a black single mother. This practice must be examined in relation to a central dilemma of feminist practice: dealing with 'difference.'

The compelling notion of sisterhood—a key component of early feminist ideology—conceptualized woman as a unitary category of analysis around which a somewhat unitary practice could be organized. The inadequacy of this approach rapidly became apparent as the women's movement grew. Through struggle socialist feminists, in particular, have come to recognize the importance of building sisterhood on the basis of difference—in class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Deconstructing the category of woman through the understanding of difference has inspired a more diverse, responsive and complex feminist practice and created the theoretical space for the articulation of a more differentiated feminist politics.

Despite the importance of the 'discovery' of difference, this approach intersects problematically with an over-emphasis on 'experience' inside the women's movement—an emphasis which has been mediated ideologically through the concept the 'personal is political.' The 'personal is political' challenges the public/private split as well as the overvaluation of the rational and concomitant devaluation of the affective; it validates experience over expertise and, at the same time, de-personalizes/politicizes women's experience; and it provides the basis for a coherent analytical and strategic approach to women's oppression. However liberating, it has often been transformed into an over-arching validation of personal experience which in turn has translated into both a competitive hierarchy of oppressions and an opposition to any kind of 'theory.'
An anti-theory emphasis on personal experience can individualize difference (each experience as unique) to such a degree that the deep rooted processes by which experience is socially constructed are concealed. As a result, the complex patterning of women’s experiences of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation is masked; even the interconnectedness between different aspects of an individual woman’s experience (for example, the links between household and workplace), can be made less accessible, thus exacerbating the fragmentation of everyday life within patriarchal capitalism. On the one hand, this tendency to anti-intellectualism and anti-theory in the women’s movement, which accompanies the emphasis on experience, promotes individualism. On the other, it promotes the identification of women, not with reason, but with nature. Both of these are part of the ideology of patriarchal capitalism.

The overemphasis on the personal in the personal/political dialectic also intersects with the politics of identity to establish an exclusionary set of identifications which becomes a competitive hierarchy of oppressions. The strategic positions which flow from this are not unproblematic. For implicit in the operation of the politics of identity is the assumption that a political strategy and, indeed, often political ‘correctness’ flow directly from identity. In practice, this can conceal political differences, between lesbians, for example, and, at the same time, overemphasize differences, between lesbians and heterosexual women, for example. The politics of identity often interfere with open strategic debate, lead to moralism, and to the elaboration of a hierarchy of oppressions. The competitive identification of certain oppressions as more salient than others promotes bonding on the basis of shared victimization, and exclusion organized around guilt, both of which undermine the possibility of political alliance between feminists.

Lynne Segal raises some similar concerns about the emphasis on experience inside the women’s movement:

Women’s liberation has always stressed that women use their own feelings, experiences and perceptions to make their analyses... It was necessary if we were to throw off the mythology of male ‘expertise’...It became a weakness when the emer-
gence of differences and conflicts between women not only produced enormous distress but became immobilising. Either it silenced those who felt guilty for being articulate and privileged or it encouraged the defensive re-assertion of some common oppression, like the experience of male violence...Within the women's movement the validation of personal experience and talk of 'common oppression' often hides straightforward ignorance of the lives of other women and of the factors beyond gender which determine women's lives... So resentment and mistrust would seem to be eternal and inevitable features of feminism were we not able to move beyond individual experience.

Both the movement from a unitary category of woman through the 'discovery' of difference and from a unitary category of feminism through the elaboration of political currents have been important in the development of the politics and practice of contemporary feminisms. However each, in itself, is inadequate in an exploration of the complexities of feminist practice.

This suggests the need for an additional framework for understanding feminisms that is situated more concretely within the activist map of the women’s movement and which theorizes feminism from its practice. We need to analyse the complexities of feminism from the standpoint of practice as a counterpoint both to the standpoint of theory (generated by the model of political currents) and also to the standpoint of experience (within which the politics of identity can be situated). The concept of the 'standpoint of practice' which I develop in the remainder of this paper is not unproblematic since there can be many forms of practice: moral practices, sexual practices, personal practices etc. Perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to the 'standpoint of strategic practice' in order to highlight, in particular, its collective character and to distinguish it further from the standpoint of experience which is often understood in personal, individualistic ways.

Although this paper will focus on the standpoint of practice, it is worth emphasizing that an analysis of feminisms and the women's movement must weave together all three standpoints: theory, experience and practice. That the principles of socialist feminism, for example, do not provide a
step-by-step blueprint for practical struggle, and in fact, often blur in the context of real political struggle does not mean that these principles are useless or only of concern to those who debate esoteric issues. On the contrary these principles establish a framework and a context from which to approach daily politics and within which to situate the myriad of issues, details and decisions which often threaten to overwhelm feminist activists. Nor am I suggesting that the understanding of difference, the validation of experience and the importance of shared identifications are unimportant—just that they are insufficient to understand the nature of feminist practice and to strategize about future directions.

To theoriz...
specific analysis of the patriarchal character of social institutions and the overwhelming evidence of women's exclusion from power in the public arena. It also draws on an alternative view of institutional mechanisms which is often referred to as 'feminist process.' Implicit in mainstreaming is the feminist commitment to transforming the everyday lives of women. This challenges the public/private split, and conventional notions of agents of change, and draws on the ideology of 'the personal is political.'

Both mainstreaming and disengagement are necessary to the feminist vision. The goal for feminist practice is the maintenance of an effective tension between the two; the dilemma is the tendency for feminist practice to be pulled towards one or other pole. This dilemma is complicated by the fact that each of these poles carries with it a strategic risk. Disengagement can easily lead to marginalization and invisibility; mainstreaming to co-optation and institutionalization. These strategic risks can be countered by an integrative politics which creates a bridge between disengagement and mainstreaming.

The building of alternatives is one of the concrete expressions of disengagement in the women's movement, one which too frequently suffers from marginalization. Charlotte Bunch makes the point that "alternative institutions should not be havens of retreat, but challenges that weaken male power over our lives." Yet the socio-political and personal conditions of patriarchal capitalism, the lack of resources available to the women's movement, combined with an overemphasis on the 'personal' as a political strategy most often limit the possibilities of alternatives—in living arrangements, co-operatives and collectives, and in business ventures. In the best of circumstances, they provide safer personal spaces for a few women; rarely are they effective as political strategies.

But even as personal havens, alternatives suffer from serious limitations. The difficulty of establishing any social/political/economic space outside of patriarchal capitalism means that feminist alternative organizations often are forced to reproduce the very norms they have set out to reject, just in order to survive. This has been well-
documented in relation to feminist co-operatives, businesses and in particular in assessing the impact on feminist organizations of the funding practices of the state. Feminist alternatives then are not able necessarily to provide a lived experience or a prefigurative vision of social transformation.

Feminist process has suffered from a peculiar counter-position and defense of personal over political experience and a paradoxically abstract characterization (and rejection) of leadership, voting, organizational structures etc. as male and patriarchal by definition. Both lead to a depoliticization of feminist organizational strategies, one result of which is that process becomes separated from political analysis, particular strategies and an identifiable set of organizational norms; further process becomes a mechanism of exclusion. The internalized, personal, and often unarticulated character of the norms and practices of feminist alternatives make them inaccessible and uncomfortable to women on the outside. This process of exclusion reinforces a politics of isolation and exacerbates the potential for marginalization inherent in disengagement.

In this regard, it has been fascinating and perhaps discouraging to witness the use and misuse of ‘feminist process’ at the 1988 annual general meeting of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). At this meeting political and strategic differences over the relative importance and nature of an organizational review provoked a divisive and highly charged debate during which feminist process as an ideology and as a practice were invoked. An analysis of the events suggests that feminist process was presented both as a reflection of a homogeneous ‘woman experience’ and as an alternative to politics, seen by defini-
tion as patriarchal. Miriam Jones and Jennifer Stephens in their assessment of that meeting said:

In the discussions which circulated at NAC and since, this process is referred to as though it is apolitical in construction, an appeal to neutrality and homogeneity which is intricately linked to the notion of a unified ‘sisterhood.’

Despite the difficulty of developing a ‘feminist process, the struggle to articulate alternatives to traditional practices needs to continue; yet at the same time we need to beware of a feminist process too deeply disengaged from concrete political practice.

Alternatives have not been an effective political strategy for making change largely because they have most often operated as a strategy of disengagement, unmediated by a degree of mainstreaming. Although this is often the result of conditions outside the control of feminists, an uncritical acceptance of the strategy of alternatives or an unelaborated political understanding of their role within the feminist community are also important contributing factors. The degree of disengagement embedded in alternatives means they are easily marginalized, creating a distance from the larger constituency of women and thereby increasing the inaccessibility and invisibility of the women's movement.

This is not to underestimate the importance to feminists of alternative ways of living our lives. For many of us these have provided support which is fundamental to our ability to sustain struggle as feminists in the work place, or within our relationships and even inside the women’s movement itself. In this sense, such alternatives have contributed to building the women’s movement. Yet however much they may improve the quality of our personal lives, this form of disengagement has not represented a viable political strategy. Space does not permit a detailed exploration of other forms of disengagement, but many exist. For example, the focus on theoretical development amongst socialist feminists in the United States and England is a form of disengagement which has exacted a high price given the degree to which it marginalizes and makes inaccessible
socialist feminism. Of course the focus on theory may be the result rather than the cause of this marginalization.

Mainstreaming is also not unproblematic. Reaching out to the majority of women with popular and practical feminist solutions to concrete problems means engaging with mainstream institutions: the family, the work place, and in particular the state and government. Engagement with mainstream institutions often leads to co-optation and institutionalization.

The forms of organization inside patriarchal capitalist institutions such as the state and the school system are hierarchic and bureaucratic. They tend to be inflexible, reinforce patterns of uniformity, regulate and neutralize dissent and difference, and by definition, limit any substantive challenge to their goals and practices. It is difficult for feminists to confront these goals and practices from inside these institutions, in part because of their isolation, and in part because of the power of these practices to subvert the challenge. The process of institutionalization often means that we lose sight of our larger goals of radical social transformation.

Institutionalization does not, however, render an issue invisible. Once taken up—by the state, for example—the issue is reshaped and reconstituted, its continuing public presence creating a new, and sometimes more difficult, task for feminists. For example, in 1987 the Ontario government finally passed Bill 154, a watered-down form of equal value legislation. With the law on the books and the long term process of implementation underway, it seems almost over-determined that feminist participation in the process will take a consultative and easily coopted form. Maintaining a degree of disengagement is increasingly complicated as mainstreaming produces institutionalization. Yet participating in that implementation process as well as mounting a serious critique of, and mobilization around, the legislation will be significant in determining its long term impact on women workers. Institutionalization does not eliminate the possibilities of feminist agency (although feminists have often felt very disempowered by that process), but rather reconstitutes the task.
Understanding the tension between institutionalization and mainstreaming reveals, rather than conceals, our political task. For, despite the tendency toward institutionalization and co-optation, a central task, in particular for socialist feminists, is to engage with, indeed transform, mainstream institutions. An over-emphasis on the danger of institutionalization can lead to an over-valuation of strategies of disengagement.

The map of practice therefore is shaped by the pulls of disengagement and mainstreaming, and by the dilemmas posed by each: marginalization and invisibility on the one hand and co-optation and institutionalization on the other. The task for feminists is to maintain a complex strategic interplay between disengagement and mainstreaming.

This model of practice can illuminate the dynamic of particular feminist struggles. Carla Lipsig-Mumme assessed the contribution of feminist strategies to the Montreal garment workers strike in 1983. In her description, she gives a striking example of the necessity to maintain a balance between disengagement and mainstreaming. In 1980 semi-skilled women operators set up the multi-ethnic Action Committee for Garment Workers (CATV). This committee was influenced by feminism and Quebec left wing socialism. In Lipsig-Mumme's words, it "crystallized a deep-seated rejection of the patriarchal aspirations of typical union elites" and was "profundly anti-bureaucratic." It focussed its energies largely on four tasks:

first, informing and educating the members as widely as possible; second, using whatever formal protections existed in the contract as militantly as possible; third, exposing the collaboration and cynicism of the union leadership; and fourth, raising ...the deeper, harder issues about homework and the future of the garment industry.

It operated from a politics of disengagement in its critique and a politics of mainstreaming in its focus on the particular problems facing women workers on the shop floor. Lipsig-Mumme details many successes of the CATV which I would attribute in part to the delicate balance that was maintained between disengagement and mainstreaming.
During the strike, however, as a result of their fear of institutionalization, the informal feminist leaders of the garment workers (from the CATV) disengaged too deeply and were marginalized. They ran the strikes' day care centre and "refused any formal responsibilities in organizing the strike."

...it was feared that even partial power would corrupt absolutely, would transform feminists into 'apparatchniks' and grind them up in the union machine.18

Lipsig-Mumme attributes the loss of the strike in large part to their refusal to continue to play a leadership role and points out that the contract was "the worst ...signed in Quebec since the 1950s."

The 1917 cost of living protests in New York City, described in Dana Franks excellent piece "Housewives, Socialists and the Politics of Food," suggests that this model of political practice can be used to explore strategic dilemmas outside of explicitly feminist organizing situations.19 Immigrant Jewish women organized violent street protests and food boycotts in response to spiralling food costs. Their purpose was very practical: to lower the cost of food. They acted from the context of the traditional sexual division of labour which gave them responsibility for the provision of food and for engagement with the market place. We could characterize their strategy as mainstreaming—the search for practical solutions. In fact, they explicitly rejected the political character of the struggle. Frank argues that the women's analysis was "neither abstract nor structural."20 The New York American reported:

But those speakers who talked plain potatoes, onions, milk, bread, eggs and butter were wildly applauded. It was for that they [the women demonstrators] had come, and not, as one woman screamed: 'To ____ with politics; give us enough to eat.' 21

In part this woman was reacting to the interventions of the Socialist Party in the boycott. In sharp contrast to the approach of the community women, the Socialist Party at-
tempted to situate rising food prices in the larger context of war profiteering.

[They] sought to define appropriate socialist solutions to the crisis. The party’s primary demand... was that the city, state, and federal governments should reconstruct the country’s food distribution centres, which would eliminate private intermediaries and thus profits on food.\textsuperscript{22}

It was only in response to the militancy of the community women—on second thought, so to speak—that the socialists introduced a second demand: “immediate purchase and sale of food by the government at cost.”\textsuperscript{23} But as described by Frank, much of the work of the socialists centred on the larger propagandistic issues—a strategy of disengagement—and they were never able to make effective links with the community protest.

Although Frank indicates that it is not entirely clear why the boycott ended, the prices did drop somewhat, the women did resume buying and we assume that they returned to the more private world of family. Readers are impressed by the organization and collectivity of the Jewish women; in the final analysis, however, we are left with the question of how to harness the explosive energy of these women to the large scale struggle for social and political transformation, that is, to combine their mainstreaming strategy with a greater degree of disengagement. The Socialist Party was ultimately unsuccessful in this task. Its strategy of disengagement unmediated by effective mainstreaming partially explains the inability to recruit the women to a larger struggle.

A third rather dramatic example of the tension around mainstreaming and disengagement can be found in the recent history of the Service Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC), an independent and explicitly feminist union, committed to organizing women workers in what have been seen as unorganizable sectors, like the banks.\textsuperscript{24} In the first instance, SORWUC was extremely successful; it managed to organize 23 bank branches (although not all were certified) and win a Canadian Labour Relations Board (CLRB) decision that overturned a 1959 ruling.
against branch by branch organizing. In the language of
this article, I would suggest that this success was rooted in
the disengaged stance of SORWUC’s organizing strategy
and in its vision of more democratic unions based on
feminist principles. But the degree of disengagement was
too extensive; SORWUC failed to develop an effective
negotiating relation with either the employers or the
Canadian Labour Congress. Few of their organized locals
were able to negotiate first contracts.

In the first place it is very important to recognize the
powerful forces arrayed against their success—in the banks,
in the unions and in the labour law itself. Rosemary Warskett
documents, for example, the devastating impact of the legal
certification framework of the Canada Labour Code. Yet
it is equally important to assess the role SORWUC’s own
decisions played in their marginalization and defeat.
Maureen FitzGerald’s conclusion that “an opportunity was
lost when the decision was made to keep the UBW [United
Bank Workers-SORWUC] out of the CLC [Canadian Labour
Congress],” is significant. Entering the CLC would cer-
tainly have threatened the degree of disengagement with
which SORWUC was operating but it also might have af-
forded the protection available from a mainstream institu-
tion. The model of feminist practice helps make some sense
of the tensions faced by SORWUC, in particular the dif-
ficulty of maintaining an effective balance between
mainstreaming and disengagement.

These applications of the model of feminist practice
demonstrate an alternative to using the construct of political
currents to explore feminism and strategic possibilities. It
is also the case, however, that each current of feminism
relates to the poles of disengagement and mainstreaming
somewhat differently—a relation mediated by the under-
standing of what kind of change is possible and necessary,
and of how change occurs. Radical feminism’s tendency to
identify, in a transhistorical way, all social institutions with
‘the patriarchy’ pushes it toward a politics of disengagement
unmediated by mainstreaming. This often leads to mar-
ginalization and isolation. Liberal feminism’s tendency to
enter into social institutions with the most limited degree
of disengagement and to focus on remedial measures explains its susceptibility to institutionalization.

Socialist feminism is caught in a contradiction. Its politics pulls it simultaneously toward both poles of practice—mainstreaming and disengagement; this sets up, dialectically, both a recurring strategic dilemma, as well as a potential solution to the dilemma of feminist practice—maintaining a tension between these poles.

Socialist feminist politics is based on a radical critique of the entire society, in particular of existing institutions, ideological practices and the complex relations of power expressed through class, gender, race and sexual orientation. In its opposition to the dominant ideology and institutions, it stands apart from the consciousness of the majority. Socialist feminism is informed by a desire to replace patriarchal capitalism and a vision of fundamental transformation. As such, socialist feminism is pulled toward the pole of disengagement.

At the same time, however, socialist feminism is pulled toward mainstreaming. For a presupposition of its politics is that such a reconstitution of the dominant ideology and social practices depends upon a public consensus about and commitment to a new social vision, and the active support and participation of a significant layer of the population in a mass political movement. Socialist feminists recognize that they cannot organize such a mass movement entirely through the politics of disengagement because of the risks of marginalization. The socialist feminist task, then, is to take its perspective, which fundamentally challenges mainstream institutions and ideology, into those very institutions and out to the public consciousness.

This tension between disengagement and mainstreaming poses a dilemma for socialist feminists, and in practice, often appears irreconcilable. Mainstreaming often leads to institutionalization which may cause socialist feminists to limit the vision of the change they seek, but disengagement may take the form of marginalization which results in an inability to mobilize the large numbers necessary to effect the kind of change desired. Socialist feminist practice must
constantly struggle to combine and resolve the contradic-
tions of mainstreaming and disengagement.

Each current of feminism situates itself in a different
location on this map of feminist practice; in essence each
evaluates the options for change differently. However, all
feminist practice risks institutionalization by organizing for
change, and involves a degree of disengagement by defini-
tion. The relation of the currents to the poles of attraction
is more a matter of degree than a rigid separation.

It is worth emphasizing that what is most important about
this model of feminist practice is not simply the additional
insight it supplies into the nature of the feminist currents.
This model facilitates the understanding of tactical decisions
which may not conform to, or even arise from, abstract
ideological principle. It allows us to see the flexibility,
 mobility and fluidity of feminist political practice; it recog-
nizes that tactical political choices made on a daily basis
reflect not only the set of abstract principles which inform
feminist currents but also particular historical and con-
junctural factors. The map of feminist practice is not shaped
within the same parameters as the map of abstract theoretical
principle.

The standpoint of practice not only enriches our under-
standing of the feminist currents but also suggests a way
of avoiding a strategic and analytic dependence on them.
It helps us to focus on the common feminist dilemma—the
necessity to bridge these poles of attraction—and allows us
to assess strategic choices in terms of their ability to build
that bridge.

Despite what I see to be the usefulness of this framework,
there is a danger inherent in this kind of ‘model building.’
What tends to get lost is the degree to which the choices
of feminist practice are constrained and shaped by political,
economic and social conditions: the nature of public con-
sciousness, the level of development of the women’s move-
ment and other progressive movements, the degree of state
repressiveness, the state of the economy etc. I am not sug-
gesting that all strategic choices are available to feminists
in any particular instance. The specific conditions we face
greatly limit the options. Nevertheless this framework can
help us to understand some of the tensions and contradictions of the choices we do make.

Having made this point I think it is equally important to stress the other side of the dialectic—agency. In emphasizing the degree to which the political and historical conjuncture shapes our choices, we often lose sight of the very premise of a feminist politics—a belief in our ability to make change. For socialist feminists, this agency is exercised through collective action. Increasing the level of self consciousness about socialist feminist practice should make strategic and tactical choices more effective in the long term.

**Socialist Feminism and Issues of Organization**
The model of feminist practice outlined above can illuminate the difficulties and dilemmas of building socialist feminist organizations in Canada. Socialist feminism has been part of the autonomous women's movement as a named politic since the beginning of the second wave of the women's movement in Canada. In the Introduction to *Women Unite*, one of the first Canadian anthologies about women, the editors state that

> Canadian women more uniformly developed an analysis of their oppression based on a class notion of society...the marxist perspective has since been central to the development of the Canadian women's liberation movement.

In 1987 Mariana Valverde confirmed that assessment:

> In the unions, in the New Democratic Party (the social democrats), in the reproductive rights movement, in the area of culture and sexual politics, even in the mainstream of women's coalition (the National Action Committee), left feminism is a formidable force.

Socialist feminism has always had a practice; it is not overly identified with the academy; it is not seen to be on the decline; and in fact socialist feminist politics have been influential in shaping the politics and practice of other currents of Canadian feminism.

Canadian socialist feminism has had an extensive and fertile ground on which to take root. Perhaps this explains
the comparative importance and strength of socialist feminist theory and practice in Canada. In other countries socialist feminism has been connected to organized left or labour party formations, or to the academy to a far greater degree. In countries where there are large parliamentary communist, socialist or labour parties, socialist feminism has been forced to contend with clarifying its organizational, ideological and strategic relationship to them. These discussions and negotiations have often dominated the discourse of socialist feminism and contributed to its low profile inside the autonomous women’s movement. In contrast Lorna Weir, a Canadian socialist feminist, argues that sexual politics, the struggle for abortion access, and the daycare movement are terrains of socialist feminist activism which extend far beyond an abstract notion of a minority of socialist feminists launching ‘class intervention’ in a preexisting women’s movement. In Canada today, socialist feminists are not simply ‘intervening’ but actually helping to define and create significant sectors of the women’s movement.

It is also the case that socialist feminism has often been overly identified with the academy, rather than the activist women’s movement. For example, in a recent series of articles on American socialist feminism in Socialist Review which raised the question: ‘Has socialist feminism died?’, Barbara Epstein concludes pessimistically that socialist feminist theory has been narrowed and hobbled by academic environs; its been shaped to the demands of academia, and its been cut off from any kind of movement.

Weir draws a similar conclusion:

Travelling in England and the United States, Canadian socialist feminists have often been very surprised to discover the strongly academic and weakly activist formation of socialist feminism in these countries. The element of surprise arises from an assumption that the large quantities of English and American socialist feminist literature, which we in Canada consume, emanate (somehow) from vast systems of socialist feminist political mobilizing. Within Canada, socialist feminists have an ongoing history of participation in popular movements, par-
ticularly the women’s movement, while comparatively few socialist feminists hold academic positions.  

Despite the strong presence of Canadian socialist feminism in the women’s movement, it does not have a high profile, if any, in the public consciousness. The reasons for this are complex but relate in part to the tendency of the dominant ideology to picture feminism, particularly through the media, as a unitary system; in fact, to equate feminism with liberal feminism. It is also due to the strategic complexities of building socialist feminist organizations. So on the one hand, the Canadian context provides the opportunity for a variety of socialist feminist organizational options to emerge; on the other hand, socialist feminism lacks a public profile—a serious problem given the socialist feminist political task.

Socialist feminism is pulled simultaneously in the direction of mainstreaming and disengagement and, therefore, socialist feminist practice can suffer from both marginalization and institutionalization. It is this unique pattern that helps explain the difficulties encountered building explicitly socialist feminist organizations, which must accommodate both the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ dimensions of the socialist feminist task. Socialist feminism faces three dilemmas in building organizations which emerge directly out of the politics and practice of socialist feminism.

First, the concomitant pulls of disengagement and mainstreaming create a dilemma about what kinds of organizations are appropriate. Disengagement suggests the building of specifically socialist feminist organizations. This might take the form of socialist feminist political organizations, such as the International Women’s Day Committee of Toronto, or Bread and Roses of Vancouver, or a feminist trade union such as SORWUC. Mainstreaming suggests entering into, or creating parallel-style mainstream organizations. This may take the form of organizing a women’s caucus or committee inside a mainstream institution like a trade union or in setting up organizations around single issues such as daycare. Inside an organization like the Toron-
to-based Action Daycare, for example, socialist feminists, often unnamed as such, fight for better daycare.

Although these choices are not necessarily mutually exclusive, it is difficult to sustain both strategies at once. And when the choice is to disengage and build alternative organizations, it is often the case that such organizations are marginalized. SORWUC provides a clear and somewhat painful example of this process. If the choice is to mainstream, co-optation and institutionalization often occur. The problems faced by trade union women’s committees in sustaining their challenge to the goals and practices of unions demonstrate this process. Despite the power of this dilemma, socialist feminists have had some successes in bridging the gap. For example, activists in the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics (OCAC), who self identify as socialist feminists, explicitly attribute their success in establishing free-standing abortion clinics in Toronto to a strategy which combines what I have called mainstreaming and disengagement.

OCAC has tried to develop a strategy that works at two levels simultaneously: transforming immediate conditions, and building a consciousness and movement that could transcend the existing oppressive relations of reproduction. We have tried to pose the argument for clinics in this double way. The existing free-standing clinics have been indispensable in providing desperately needed services to thousands of women, in dramatizing daily how unfair and unworkable the existing law is, and in showing the solution in the most concrete and immediate fashion possible. At the same time, clinics can be posed as a model for the future: centres providing care for the full spectrum of women’s reproductive lives... Having a clear and attractive vision of ultimate goals is very important, not so much as a blueprint for the future, but as an understandable and realizable alternative that can seize peoples imagination and enthusiasm in the present.

Second, the centrality of ‘difference’ to socialist feminist politics and practice creates some contradictions around the building of socialist feminist organizations. A politics of building sisterhood on the basis of difference is expressed organizationally in the women’s movement, not through
large homogeneous political organizations, but rather through alliances and coalitions.

Inside feminist coalitions, socialist feminists are torn between two political tasks: the need for a broadly-based mass movement (mainstream) and the need to win women to a socialist feminist vision (disengagement). The first goal lends itself to the building of alliances constructed on a limited basis of unity which would appeal to the widest audience but which would not offer much opportunity to highlight socialist feminism; the second suggests an explicit focus on building a socialist feminist organization or current—that is, attempting to win women to a socialist feminist perspective. The former functions in a politically heterogeneous environment; the latter aims toward a degree of homogeneity and is, by definition, threatening to the coalition process.38 Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of the struggle to work out the tension between coalition building and the ideological and organizational propagation of socialist feminism lies in the history of IWDC and the March 8th Coalition in Toronto.39

Finally the socialist feminist belief in the necessity for a fundamental social transformation that challenges not only gender relations but also the relations of class, race and sexual orientation implies a commitment to the building of a mass heterogeneous political movement that reaches far beyond even the widest boundaries of the women’s movement. This means alliances with organizations outside the women’s movement, such as trade unions and progressive community groups who organize around peace, anti-intervention, environmental issues and if they exist, parliamentary and extra-parliamentary socialist and communist parties. In all these cases this means organizing with men and thereby raises complex questions about the relation between the building of such alliances and autonomous feminist organizing. In addition, in cases where socialist feminist groups have developed strategic links with institutionalized structures in the trade union movement or the NDP, problems of jurisdiction, of leadership, and of the range of legitimate issues continually surface.40 This demonstrates the extent to which mainstreaming can limit
the degree of disengagement. Yet despite these difficulties, it is interesting to note that in a recent overview of left organizing in Canada, the following assessment is made.

The emergence and ongoing development by women of a socialist-feminist perspective has been central to this process. Some would see this perspective...as the single most important factor shaping the politics of the left in the last two decades. But at the same time, this new development has provided positive direction to processes that have shaped feminism and gay politics, the politics of social movements, and the political agenda and structure of the trade union movement.\textsuperscript{41}

A recurring theme of these organizational issues speaks to whether it is more appropriate to build socialist feminist organizations (disengagement) or to enter into existing organizations and transform them (mainstreaming). A specific dilemma in this regard relates to the interior process of organizations. Feminists have developed an extensive critique of the process and practices of most social institutions (including the democratic centralism of far left organizations), and have attempted to develop, although not always successfully, an alternative feminist process. That feminist process is most easily explored in alternative organizations presents some difficulties for socialist feminists who reject alternatives as an adequate political strategy and yet who simultaneously reject the practices of mainstream institutions.

It is not so easy to juggle these various options and, as a result, building explicitly socialist feminist organizations has not been a priority. The exceptions to this are Saskatoon Women’s Liberation, Bread and Roses of Vancouver and the International Women’s Day Committee of Toronto (IWDC). Although IWDC has been the most long-lasting, its failure to sustain a membership beyond about thirty-five requires some analysis. Perhaps the tension between disengagement and mainstreaming helps to explain this: IWDC simultaneously attempts to play a role as an alternative and a haven at the same time that it operates as a political organization.

Heather Jon Maroney in her analysis of socialist feminist organizations says:
Operating from a mainly ideological basis of unity, these organizations have lacked the focus of single-issue campaigns and the institutional cohesion of the self-help services that also evolved from the initial phases of the women's liberation movement. Externally, they have generally met with hostility from the mixed Leninist left, suspicion from the labour movement, and opposition from radical and bourgeois feminists.

From the perspective on feminist practice presented in this article, the lack of single issue focus is the problem of inadequate mainstreaming; the hostility and suspicion, on the other hand, reflects one of the difficulties associated with disengagement.

Although the foregoing discussion looks at the complexities of building socialist feminist organizations, there is no consensus among socialist feminists about whether separate socialist feminist organizations *per se* are the best strategy. And, of course, at different historical and political conjunctures such organizations might be more or less viable. Notwithstanding this, assessments of existing socialist feminist organizations and discussions of establishing new ones must take account of the inherently contradictory nature and complexity of the task of building socialist feminism. Yet strategically, organizationally, and theoretically, socialist feminism has much potential. Certainly it is important to see how the on-going and creative struggle of socialist feminists has influenced the politics of feminism and of socialism in Canada, and contributed to improving the conditions of women's lives.

Notes

The first draft of this paper was presented at the Third International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women in Dublin in July 1987. It also draws on material from *Feminist Organizing for Change: the contemporary women's movement in Canada*, co-authored with Nancy Adamson and Margaret McPhail (Toronto, 1988). Isa Bakker, Mariana Valverde and Lorna Weir read an earlier draft of this paper and provided helpful comments and criticisms; thanks also to Roberta Hamilton for her skilful editing.

2. "The cultural politics of...the early seventies [were] extraordinarily, if naively, optimistic that as women we could change our lives and those
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of others once we saw through 'male lies.' Many feminists were eagerly attempting to change every aspect of their lives: how we lived with and related to other adults and children, how we worked and developed new skills, how we saw ourselves...Much of the cultural feminism of today, in contrast, is less concerned with change: it calls upon the timeless truths of women's lives, sufficient in themselves, but threatened by the perpetual and invasive danger of men. It suggests that women do not need to change their lives, other than to separate themselves from the lives of men, and that there is little hope of men themselves changing.” Segal, *Is the Future Female?* pp. 68-9.

3. Mariana Valverde pointed out the importance of this kind of self-labeling in the women's movement and suggested the term the "politics of identity." Later I came across the following comment in an early statement from black feminists. “This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression.” The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in Zillah Eisenstein (ed.), *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: 1979), p. 364.


5. It is interesting to note that only liberal feminists have even the glimmering of a clear institutional base. In both the USA and Canada liberal feminism operates through national umbrella structures: the National Organization of Women (NOW) in the US and National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) in Canada. Building and maintaining such an organizational base is easier for liberal feminism because of the practices of representative democracy in both these countries. It is also the case that socialist feminism faces a peculiar dilemma in attempting to build an organizational base. This will be addressed in the last section of this paper.


7. In her analysis of sisterhood, Bell Hooks makes the point that bonding based on shared victimization reflects male supremacist thinking since “sexist ideology teaches women that to be female is to be a victim.” Further Hooks points out that by “identifying as ‘victims,’ they [white women] could abdicate responsibility for their role in the maintenance and perpetuation of sexism, racism and classism, which they did by insisting that men were the only enemy.” Hooks goes on to argue for bonding on the basis of “shared strengths and resources.” See Bell Hooks, “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women,” *Feminist Review*, No. 23 (June 1986), p. 128. Although I agree with Hooks, my point is that the recognition of difference between women has not only challenged the notion of shared oppression for the category of woman as a whole but has, at the same time, reinforced bonding on the basis of ‘shared victimization’ for particular groups of women to the exclusion of building effective political alliances.

9. Although beyond the scope of this article to develop it, it seems to me that this paradigm transcends some of the theoretical and strategic limitations of the perceived opposition between reform and revolution.


11. It is interesting to note that Jaggar uses the quote from Bunch cited in the text to distinguish between radical feminist and socialist feminist alternatives. "Radical feminists intend their alternative institutions should enable women to withdraw as far as possible from the dominant culture by facilitating women's independence from that culture...Socialist feminists, by contrast...build alternative institutions as a way of partially satisfying existing needs and also as a way of experimenting with new forms of working together." She herself points out that these distinctions are not 'clear cut.' See Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 336.


14. See Sue Findlay, "Facing the State: the Politics of the Women's Movement Reconsidered," in Heather Jon Maroney and Meg Luxton (eds.), *Feminism and Political Economy* (Toronto: 1987) for a description of the process of the Canadian state integrating the representation of women's issues into the policy making process, and a discussion of the difficulties faced by feminists working as civil servants in attempting to intervene in that process.

15. Dorothy Smith, in "Where there is oppression, there is resistance," *Branching Out*, VI/1 (1979) discusses a process she calls 'institutional absorption,' which occurs as the women's movement interacts with the social institutions, a process not dissimilar to what I have called institutionalization. She says, "A major danger is the process of institutional absorption. I imagine it to be like a starfish eating a clam, sucking the living tissues from the shell. Institutional structures are set up to organize and control and they do it well. When critical positions and
action emerge related to an institutional focus, processes are set in motion which bring things back in line, which absorb the anomaly, and keep things stabilized....Each new way of absorbing women's movement initiatives into the institutional structure isolates them from the movement and depoliticizes them...as the work is absorbed by the ruling apparatus it is withdrawn from the general struggle..." (p.13-14) She goes on to argue that the problem is that much of feminist organizing has been "in relation to the institutional structure of the ruling apparatus. To do something about rape it seems that we should work in relation to the police, the courts and the law." (p.14)


24. For a detailed discussion of the attempts of SORWUC (Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada) to organize the bank workers, see The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, (Vancouver: 1979).


27. The other anthology published in 1972 was compiled by Margret Andersen and entitled *Mother was Not a Person* (Montreal: 1972).


30. See, for example, Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: feminism and the making of socialism* (Boston: 1981). See also Monica Threlfall, "The Women's Movement in Spain," *New Left Review*, #151 (May/June 1985). She discusses the situation after the fall of the Franco regime in which the left attempted to hegemonize the newly emerging women's movement. "Within the women's movement ...opinions divided over the question of doble militancia, of whether women should spend their time being activists in a political party as well as in a women's group..." p. 46.


32. In a conversation with Deirdre English, Barbara Epstein, Barbara Haber and Judy Maclean, “The Impasse of Socialist Feminism,” *Socialist Review*, 79 (Jan/Feb 1985), p. 101. Judy Maclean in the same article suggests pessimistically that socialist feminism "as a term and as a
means of excluding other women... is dead." (p. 103.) This is number ten in a series of articles on socialist feminism in Socialist Review. Although many are quite pessimistic, this article generated a more optimistic view from Amy Bachrach and Carisa Cunningham, in "What do you mean the party's over? We just got here!" Socialist Review, 81 (May/June 1985).


34. The discussion which follows is one part of a larger discussion of feminist organizations and feminist process in Adams, Briskin & MacPhail, Feminist Organizing for Change. See chapter 7.

35. For a discussion of the difficulties building trade union women's committees and the conditions under which such committees get co-opted, see Debbie Field, "The Dilemma facing Women's Committees", in Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz (eds.), Union Sisters (Toronto: 1983).


37. Ibid. p. 149. This article documents this process in detail. It is also interesting to note that Nancy Adamson and Susan Prentice, in "Toward a Broader Strategy for Choice," Cayenne, 3 (May-June 1985) criticize OCAC for inadequate 'disengagement,' in particular, for an underlying acceptance of the medical model.

38. It is also the case that the tendency of far left groups and the feminists aligned with them to enter other feminist formations with an already decided plan of action that is not openly presented has encouraged some feminists to be especially wary of socialist feminists and their organizations. Further, there still exists in Canada a few left front groups (for example the Congress of Canadian Women led and dominated by the Communist Party) who are not open about their political affiliation.


40. For a discussion of some of the tensions(and successes) faced by IWDC in working with the trade union movement, see Carolyn Egan and Lynda Yanz, "Building Links: Labour and the Women's Movement" in Briskin and Yanz (eds.) Union Sisters.


42. Heather Jon Maroney, "Feminism at Work," in Feminism and Political Economy, p.96.