Meg Luxton’s article in this issue of SPE, “Marxist Feminism and Anticapitalism: Reclaiming Our History, Reanimating Our Politics,” and her recent essay written with Joan Sangster in The Socialist Register are among a spate of recent articles and books engaging with questions of feminist historiography. In particular, the critical response to Nancy Fraser’s 2013 book Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis and Hester Eisenstein’s 2009 book Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women’s Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World manifests a renewed interest in the way that Marxist currents have been remembered or forgotten in accounts of feminism’s successes and shortcomings.¹ In the current piece, Luxton undertakes what she calls the “re-appropriation of our history,” reincorporating into the narrative of feminism’s trajectory the strands of the movement that view capitalism as intrinsically incompatible with feminist goals and principles.

There is no question that debates about movement historiography are an important resource for conceptualizing the present. Indeed, social movement histories—and the debates about how those histories have been rendered and re-rendered over time and for different political purposes—arguably represent the richest vein of movement-relevant, social movement theorizing.² These recent efforts to remember the anticapitalist character of many feminist principles, policy interventions, and organizing strategies offer from the outset a useful intervention into a static and demobilizing convention of representing feminism’s historical trajectory. Namely, by focusing not on chronological “waves” or “generations” of feminism but on “current”s,³ “strands,”⁴ or tendencies, such accounts foreground the contingency and contestation that have always been at the centre of the movement’s
(and any movement’s) dynamics. Rather than naturalizing a static chronology in which one set of norms or goals displaces or supersedes its predecessors, Luxton draws into relief the continuous presence of competing visions of feminist emancipation, whether liberal or socialist in character.

At the heart of this drive to reflect on and revise prevailing feminist historiography lies a concern with the relationship between feminism and opposition to capitalism. Specifically, how can feminist goals and principles be rallied more effectively to counter neoliberal common sense, rather than serving, as Hester Eisenstein argues, as alibis for a class-blind liberal individualism? (When Sheryl Sandberg, Marisa Mayer, and Carly Fiorina serve as icons of feminism’s victory, “feminism” appears not only to co-exist seamlessly with capitalist social relations, but to represent the culmination of liberalism itself.) Luxton suggests that a particular narrative of feminist history has served to disaffiliate feminist goals, principles, organizing strategies, and political identities from those on the Left, thus contributing to the fragmented and ineffective nature of our collective opposition to the ongoing neoliberal assault. Properly remembering feminism’s history, then, is necessary to making its lessons and insights usable for a thoroughly feminist anticapitalist opposition.

I would like to make two simple points related to the question of feminist historiography and anticapitalist struggle raised by Luxton’s essay. The first relates to the important distinction between hegemony and co-optation as explanations for the trajectory of mainstream feminism, sketching out some implications of this distinction for making a usable account of feminism’s history. The second concerns Luxton’s discussion of social reproduction—the elaboration of which has been the most major conceptual contribution of socialist feminism to both Marxism and feminism—examining how, in practice, its insights might inform contemporary struggles against neoliberalism.

Co-optation vs. Hegemony In their response to Nancy Fraser’s “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History,” Meg Luxton and Joan Sangster take issue with Fraser’s account of the apparent “convergence” of feminist and neoliberal ideals. Fraser provocatively asks whether it was “mere coinci-
dence that second-wave feminism and neoliberalism prospered in tandem,” setting herself the task of investigating whether “there might be some perverse, subterranean elective affinity between them." Hester Eisenstein's *Feminism Seduced* similarly offers a narrative of mid-twentieth-century feminism's vulnerability to co-optation, as capitalism “made use of feminist ideology,” taking “the ideas of feminism and turning them to its own ends.” For Fraser and Eisenstein, as well as for Luxton and Sangster, at issue is what role such an “elective affinity” might play in facilitating the co-optation of feminist ideals for the neoliberal political project.

The crux of the disagreement among these feminist critics lies in the distinction between the mechanisms of co-optation and the dynamics of hegemony. As Luxton and Sangster argue, the “elective affinity” that Fraser describes may well exist between neoliberalism and specific currents of feminist thought. The compatibility of liberal feminism with neoliberalism, they point out, is “an explicit, structural compatibility,” not evidence of feminism “selling out” or being “seduced” by an external neoliberal ideology. The problem, which Luxton's piece in this issue is an effort to begin to rectify, lies in the way that feminist currents with an explicit, structural antagonism to capitalism have been occluded because feminism's history is actively rewritten as the history of liberal feminism. In other words, Fraser is describing the outcome of liberal hegemony, which has successfully articulated feminism to a liberal vision of freedom and justice.

This debate is fruitful not only for reinserting anticapitalist feminist currents into our account of feminism's history, but for highlighting the strategic importance of distinguishing between hegemony and co-optation when diagnosing the causes of a social movement's demobilization or decline. Lamenting and anticipating the co-optation of social movement leaders, goals, vocabularies, and subcultures is an old and deep tradition of social movement historiography. What caused the demobilization of the black liberation struggle following the mass mobilizations and legal victories of the 1950s and 1960s? What explains organized labour's quiescence in the face of the steady erosion of earlier generations' hard-won gains? To what extent can the decline in movements’ militancy or activity be attributed to decisions by leaders or organizations to prioritize moderate goals over more trans-
formative demands, accept compromises, or lower the expectations of movement participants in the name of achievability?

In any movement, no doubt, co-optation is part of the dynamic of struggle, and co-optation and hegemony are related phenomena. But as frameworks for explaining social movement dynamics, co-optation and hegemony generate somewhat different pictures of the choices, challenges, and opportunities faced by movement actors at a given conjuncture. In particular, each offers a different orientation to movement actors’ political opponents, allies, and fellow travellers, all of which shape a movement’s strategic repertoire. Luxton and Sangster take Nancy Fraser to task for her account of feminism’s “co-optation” by neoliberal values, yet Luxton begins her own essay with a lament for the co-optation of Left vocabulary in the service of liberalism and knee-jerk anticommunism.8 As Luxton notes, the response to this co-optation has been to abandon words like “socialism” and “communism” in favour of not-yet-tainted words and loosely defined concepts like “anticapitalism.” Analyzing a movement’s setbacks through the lens of co-optation too often has the perverse effect of encouraging and justifying retreat, purism, and subcultural insularity, as if a movement’s success could be assured by a co-optation-proof campaign, vocabulary, or vision.

In contrast, the concept of hegemony provides a more productive and politically enabling framework for making sense of the ebb and flow of social movements’ rise and decline. Hegemony and its associated concepts in the Gramscian tradition—particularly as elaborated by Stuart Hall—are equipped to recognize what ought to be a truism: that partial victories are always also partial failures in a given struggle.9 Rather than identifying incomplete or interim gains as moments of vulnerability to co-optation, the concepts of hegemony and counterhegemony push us to locate such events as features in the complex social landscape that must be navigated. How does an incomplete legal victory, a compromised electoral win, or a contradictory shift in mainstream cultural norms change the terrain of organizing? What tactics, targets, or constituencies become available (or unavailable) as a result of such changes? Where “co-optation” seems to diagnose a movement’s impending retreat and demobilization, an analysis
that privileges hegemony offers a more complete repertoire for understanding the complexity of movements’ temporal trajectories over the long term. After all, there are many names for partial victories; the distinction between provisional or interim goals, reformism, compromise, partial defeat, and co-optation can be of great consequence for the way movement actors respond to changing conditions of organizing.

The concept of hegemony is also far better equipped than co-optation to move us beyond a voluntarist account of the “choices” made by social movement actors and their opponents. Hegemony, as James Cairns observes in a forthcoming issue of SPE, has a material basis. While the dominance of feminism’s liberal wing certainly reflects the cultural power of liberal language and ideas, its hegemony is substantially attributable to the material conditions of life under neoliberal capitalism. It is not simply the case that liberal feminism has more skillfully and persistently inserted its language and ideas into the culture, or that mainstream media and educational and political institutions have been more hospitable to liberal articulations of feminist principles. Of course it matters that liberal feminist ideas more readily find platforms and resources that facilitate their incorporation into the broader culture, and which contribute actively to the eclipse and marginalization of anticapitalist feminist currents. What is missing from this analysis, however, is an account of the way people’s daily experiences in the world themselves provide fertile ground for individualist, market-based, competitive articulations of gender justice.

The conditions of everyday life under neoliberalism mean that few people have sustained, positive experiences of collective decisionmaking, socialized resource allocation, or solidaristic, noncompetitive environments in which to work, learn, or play. Such conditions are an essential feature of liberal feminism’s success at dominating the field of feminism’s cultural power and meaning. Where “co-optation” encourages us to focus on the choices of social movement actors and their opponents—to adopt or abandon a rhetorical strategy, institutional space, or political vocabulary, for example—thinking about feminism in terms of hegemony leads us to consider the conditions of life that enable and constrain alternative futures. Our living conditions, in other words, are also our organizing conditions. Countering
neoliberalism will require us to mitigate the conditions of everyday life that make it difficult to think or act outside of market logics of competitive individualism. Here the insights of Marxist feminism provide a valuable resource, not only for identifying capitalism’s reliance on the work of social reproduction, but for generating a strategic repertoire that addresses the hegemony’s material basis in everyday life.

From Analysis to Strategy: The Strategic Implications of Social Reproduction Feminism (SRF) The concept of social reproduction occupies a central place in Luxton’s effort to reclaim the Marxist currents of feminism’s history. In particular, Luxton notes that “struggles over who bears the costs of social reproduction [are] at the heart of class struggle and are central to the oppression of women, racialized, and poor peoples.” Here I want to draw a connection between the insights of social reproduction feminism (SRF) and the strategic implications of hegemony’s material basis. Remaking feminism’s history as a usable resource for the present means not only that we remember forgotten episodes or guiding principles of struggle, but that we accurately map the terrain that led us to our current position. “Co-optation,” I have argued, does a poor job in providing that map. The Gramscian concept of hegemony—particularly when harnessed to an account of social reproduction—represents a vital, strategic resource for building an effective feminist opposition to neoliberalism.

In a 2008 essay called “Canadian Contributions to Social Reproduction Feminism, Race, and Embodied Labour,” Sue Ferguson meditates on the potential of SRF to “foreground the experiential and human agency” through its foundational premise: “that we labour…to reproduce and change our social relations.” SRF, writes Ferguson, offers a social theory grounded in the “sensuous, practical activity [of labour] in both its alienated and nonalienated forms.” By identifying the “essential unity” between the political and cultural dynamics at play in the formal sphere of capitalist production and in the informal, often unpaid activities of creating and maintaining biological and social life, SRF highlights the potential for strategic interventions that cut across this varied terrain. Workers’ struggles over the conditions of production, in other words, cannot be separated from people’s
struggles over the conditions of social reproduction. Just as the shared experiences of workers at the site of production can form the ground from which shared perspectives and solidarities are forged, so too can we craft new collectivities through the “sensuous, practical activities” of giving and receiving care.

What are the practical, strategic implications of recognizing that our living conditions—at work, at home, in our families and communities—are also our organizing conditions? Recent interest in what is variably called “social unionism,” “community unionism,” and “social movement unionism” reflects an increasing awareness of the importance of linking workplace struggles to people’s needs beyond the workplace, whether for childcare, healthcare, or other vital services and infrastructure. “Social unionism” has been frequently invoked as a strategy of renewal for existing trade unions in a period of declining union density and bargaining power. But as Ross notes, the concept of social unionism remains relatively undeveloped, both as a philosophical orientation to labour struggles and as a tactical repertoire for organizing. The renewed interest in debates of Marxist feminism—and in social reproduction feminism, particularly—stems from the same concerns that are driving recent discussions of “social unionism” and the role of unions in the defence of public services. Indeed, the “reclamation of our [feminist] history” undertaken by Luxton should include an account of the link between contemporary unions’ credibility and the extent to which they have incorporated a concern with social reproduction into their core demands and practices—whether bargaining for parental leaves or fighting spending cuts that would erode the quality and accessibility of healthcare.

The realm of social reproduction represents a critical node of analysis linking capitalist social relations to the embodied—and thus gendered and racialized—practices and experiences of everyday life. But equally important, attention to social reproduction can help orient new strategies of Left/feminist opposition to neoliberalism. Countering the hegemony of liberal feminism, and of neoliberalism generally, requires that we intervene in the sensuous, material conditions of people’s lives, which contribute to making socialist alternatives unthinkable for the vast majority of people.
This means recognizing the full range of activities and experiences that are sites for the entrenchment or disruption of neoliberal common sense, whether in our workplaces, schools, hospitals, buses, community centres, housing projects, or city streets. In sum, to the extent that social unionism is a nascent tradition in public service unions in Canada today, it can anchor the re-articulation of Left and feminist theory and practice that Luxton encourages us to reclaim.

Notes

10. Cairns. “Learning from Common Sense on Campus.”