

ONE

CONTINGENCY PLANS FOR THE
FEMINIST REVOLUTION

A 1998 cover of *Time* magazine broadcasts its apocalyptic question: “Is Feminism Dead?”¹ The *Time* story bolsters its predictions about the death of feminism by citing the declining numbers of women, particularly young women, who identify themselves as feminists.² The article inside caricatures the movement that its cover kills off by query. “Feminism: It’s All About Me!” the title declares. The drift of this second title is also commonplace: nobody does politics anymore, and this cultural stuff going on with young people is at best lifestyle politics. Young people care more about transforming the individual body than the social polity. Young women, and youth more generally, have embraced the defensive posture of consumption politics: what they eat, what they wear, and what they buy. This potent mix—combining predictions of the movement’s imminent death with a political irrelevance dominates media discussions of feminism and youth politics.³

Recent publications about third wave feminism are mostly collections of articles.⁴ As at the inception of the women’s liberation movement, the diversity of positions and ideas fueling interest in the third wave of feminism is accommodated anthology-style. Positions expressed in the collection, then as now, are contradictory and widely disparate in their concerns and ideas.⁵ The writings about as yet diffuse politics suggest rather than state the contours of their subject. The most striking difference from earlier collections edited by Leslie Tanner, Toni Cade, Sookie Stambler, Edith Hoshino Altbach, and other better known feminists is that essays about third wave feminism are written, almost exclusively, in the first person.⁶ The personal voice does not mean these articles are entirely about the writers. More general concerns emerge from many, though certainly not all, of these articles.

Anthologies of third wave feminism contain a related preoccupation: they present feminism as an identity they cannot fully embrace.⁷ But these collections take their concerns a step further than *Time* analysts; they begin to reject feminism as an identity and wonder about feminism as a movement. In her introduction to one anthology about young people and feminism, entitled *To Be Real*, Rebecca Walker

outlines this transition from feminism as an identity to feminism as a movement. Walker writes:

For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity. . . . [T]ragically, rather than struggling to locate themselves within some continuum of feminism . . . many young women and men simply bow out altogether, avoiding the dreaded confrontation with some of the people who presently define and represent feminism, and with their own beliefs.⁸

Walker rejects the simplistic characterization by conservative feminists of feminism as a dead or irrelevant movement, such as Christine Sommers' scathing assessment in her book *The Morning After*. Instead, Walker reframes the term feminism as a continuum rather than an identity. Feminism, then, is not solely a failed movement, though many of the critiques in Walker's volume presume a basic failure in second wave feminism. Feminism is a process. These articles suggest a third path: if young feminists disagree with current trends in feminism, their role must be to change rather than merely reject the movement. Third wave feminist articles, I suggest, are shifting away from feminism as an identity-defining movement towards a flexible, responsive movement, one that participants shape as the movement transforms them. Third wave feminists, in this respect, mirror early second wave activists of the women's liberation movement.

At this time of emerging possibilities for feminist movements, this chapter reintroduces for collective discussion, or memory-work, that formative second wave paradigm: reform-versus-revolution. The women's liberation movement (WLM) was predicted before it had a name, named before it was a movement, and imagined as revolutionary even when its politics were strictly reformist. This chapter theorizes the lessons of contingency from a movement forgotten long before its legacy dissipates. Present discussions about contingency in feminism center on the subject in politics and the tactics that develop in relation to that subject's conditions. We forget about the emergence and maintenance of revolutionary feminism when we focus so determinedly on questions of identity and subjectivity divorced from organization. Professionally published essays by Margaret Benston and Juliet Mitchell, and early manifestoes, memos, and position papers, debated reform-versus-revolution in the tactics, forms, and strategies of the WLM to develop an understanding of how collective movements demand an enduring contingency. Most importantly for this period of an aspiring third wave of feminism, these debates remind us of an earlier center for feminist theories of social change: the political movement.

This unearthed paradigm carries demands of its own. Early questions about how to build a revolutionary movement cannot be grafted onto our theories about the subject. A movement is composed of subjects and subjectivities, identities and consciousness, but it is not the sum of its parts. To a large degree, we have lost the tools to understand a movement as an entity. I draw on a de-

bate over organization from the early twentieth century between Georg Lukács, Rosa Luxemburg, and V. I. Lenin to analyze the movement as a form of collective politics.⁹ To attend to the concerns of organization is to envisage what feminism might configure now, and again in a past as rife with possibility as the present. As an ongoing process of contestation and configuration, emboldened demands, and inspired destruction, feminism must be seen as a movement located in its own organizational imagination as much as in a determinate period or social context.

The tension between reform and revolution predicated (even as it predicted) the women's liberation movement by debating how to build a revolutionary (rather than reformist) movement. Present time lines of the second wave women's movement discuss the movement as a series of debates between equality and difference. But early second wave analyses of political economy and their predictions about a revolutionary women's movement palpably illustrate a more movement-based site of departure. Debates about equality and difference are debates about subjects *in politics*. Early debates over reform and revolution, as they mapped the terrain through a study of political economy, ask about the movement and its social context as a whole. But two concerns regarding the political subject developed from these debates. The first is still voiced in present feminist debates: the subject in politics. The second concern—the subject *produced by* the political movement—has largely disappeared. This chapter takes a closer look at what present histories have occluded: the movement as a theoretical starting point to reevaluate an early second wave feminist methodology for an emerging movement.

In early writings about the women's movement an understanding of political economy illuminates how women are integrally linked to complex social, political, and economic relations of capitalism.¹⁰ These writings draw out the connections between a revolutionary women's movement and the class struggle as well as struggles against racism.¹¹ In addition, the recognition of the political economy of women denies the immutability of these relations by revealing contradictions around gender and sex. As Margaret Benston's early essay argues even in its title, "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation," women's liberation is part of the purview of political economy.¹² But an analysis of political economy alone could not answer how to turn this understanding of social conditions into a revolutionary feminist platform or how to theorize the relation between reformist political work and revolutionary aims. To understand how to give political form to a systemic analysis of gender and to a women's liberation movement, we need to add other categories to our study: organization and struggle.

Georg Lukács defines organization as the intersection of theory and practice. In this sense, organization is a conceptual scope of analysis.¹³ Women are not a natural constituency for politics, but the development of women as a political constituency takes particular paths that we can trace through myriad movements and groups. Organization guides subjects in politics to articulate what those paths are

and where they lead. Mitchell and Benston, through their analyses of the political economy of women, suggest very different possibilities for the women's liberation movement. Mitchell's analysis endorses the traditional left prerequisite for a revolutionary feminism: shift women from unpaid reproductive labor to paid productive work. Benston includes another important precondition: transform the relations of reproductive labor from atomized and unpaid into communal and commodified. As an impetus for future campaigns, demands, and strategies, Benston's article adds another site for revolutionary feminist politics: domestic labor.

Embedded in the larger socioeconomic context of the movement are pointedly strategic questions. How do we build a strong group/movement? Whom do we want to approach? How do we frame our issues? These questions all pertain to the methods of political activism. Additional questions are: Who are our subjects? What are our objects? How do these subject/objects meet in politics? Most studies of particular groups or social movements relay information about organization, even if the junctures between theory and practice are not explicitly outlined and even if the concept of organization is not theorized. Mitchell suggests the workplace as a primary site for a revolutionary feminist movement. Benston casts a much wider net, potentially including the home, the shopping center, the park, and other places where women congregate as domestic laborers. What defines women in a women's liberation movement in these two visions, correspondingly, will differ widely. Through their different conclusions about the political economy of women, Mitchell and Benston generate different sites, subjects, and methods for revolutionary feminism.

Organization as a category of analysis does not just illuminate the political methods employed, but helps to raise a more speculative question: Where will it end? What do we want to achieve? How can we go from here to there? And, at the center of this book, the question: what *can* these politics produce? More specifically, what are the limits of the different constructions of gender and women in politics? Both sets of questions, whether about political tools or political goals, demand that the intersection of theory and practice produce full answers. Mitchell and Benston share a common goal, the liberation of women. Both look beyond the formal equality between women and men toward transforming the social and political relations that bind women and men. But Mitchell harnesses changes in reproductive labor to those in productive labor, linking changes in unpaid "women's work" to struggles in the paid workplace. Benston creates two additional trajectories for a revolutionary feminism: first, toward a reversal of this causality, second, toward a political semi-autonomy between the two sites.

A more comprehensive study must also look at centrist and right-wing theories of organizing women, since the concept of organization does not delimit the field of questioning to leftist politics. However, for a leftist or revolutionary movement, organization has particular implications, even in a scholarly study of organization. To ask what is organization, then, is not the same question for leftist, liberal, or conservative politics, since the character of politics and the demands of those politics on organization transform the object of study.

TIME LINES AND SECOND WAVE
RECONSTRUCTIONS

Recent books about the second wave women's movement stress the movement's contradictory, contestatory, and noncontiguous character through revealing detail. Daniel Horowitz's biography of Betty Friedan extends our knowledge of feminism's many debts, not just to other movements like the communist Left, civil rights, and peace movements, but more surprisingly to the Cold War.¹⁴ Horowitz builds on an often implicit thesis about the constitutive influence of conservatism on feminism in books about women's politics in the late forties to early sixties, such as Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor's groundbreaking history, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s*.¹⁵ He underscores how the conservative forces of anticommunism shaped Friedan's choice of middle-class housewives as the audience and subject for *The Feminine Mystique*. Horowitz shows how the goal of women's equality was deeply embedded in McCarthyist political repression as it scaled back more radical, and more threatening demands for women's freedom or women's liberation.

Elizabeth Guy-Sheftall's anthology, entitled *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, reintroduces the confrontations of feminist ideas with Cold War politics (and the usurpation of those ideas by the latter) through the writings of Lorraine Hansberry, Claudia Jones, and Florynce Kennedy. Guy-Sheftall's volume also celebrates the ephemeral quality of much early second wave feminist writing. She draws together essays often passed around as photostats of hand-written documents, like "A Historical and Critical Essay for Black Women" by Patricia Haden, Donna Middleton, and Patricia Robinson, and essays that served as manifestoes for new formations, such as Mary Ann Weathers's "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force." Guy-Sheftall combines essays whose authors do not share the same political affiliations—even take oppositional positions—and establishes an internally contradictory canon of African-American feminist thought. By retaining these ideological contradictions, Guy-Sheftall's volume undermines essentialist definitions of a single African-American feminist constituency and history.¹⁶

Such anthologies as Guy-Sheftall's, Alma Garcia's (*Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*), and Barbara Crow's (*Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*) embrace the lack of a consensus, the sheer messiness of feminism, as they showcase the wide diversity of Chicano, African-American, and radical feminist thought. These writings shaped (as often as they were ignored) constructions of the radical and youth-oriented women's liberation movement. This respect for the ephemera generated in the women's movement, and for its importance to our understanding of feminism, also animates Katie King's wide-ranging book, *Theory in Its Feminist Travels: Conversations in U.S. Women's Movements*.¹⁷ She figures her conversations not as distinct voices with coherent arguments, but as overlapping positions and dynamic illustrations of the lack of proximity between feminisms.¹⁸ Because King refuses to stabilize her objects of study, she cannily

reveals power relations within the women's movement as histories and memories continue to construct it. She writes about black women's marginalization from the women's movement and the methodological implications of this marginalization:

But I think this formulation/assumption of white women at the center masks the other possibility, the one implied by Stimpson's "envious" description of the Black movement, another evaluation that white women are newcomers, not at all at a preexisting center on the outskirts of the Black movement and other social justice movements, and of the new left. . . . White privilege and radical white women's difficult experiences in the new left combine with Echols's formulation of radical feminism's claims of autonomy to produce a shifting illusion/reality newly/retrospectively centering white women, in the political imagination of white women's liberations, as "the feminist struggle."¹⁹

King suggests how the singularity of feminism masks internal debates and power struggles to define feminism. She illustrates the productive incoherence of even a movement as such. She, like Guy-Sheftall, Crow, and Garcia, shows feminist plurality not as a recent and enlightened corrective to past mistakes, a simple game of numbers and recognition, but as a question of research, methodology, and ideology.

Other anthologies nod to the richness of feminist ephemera as theory. Rosemary Hennessey and Chrys Ingraham's collection, *Materialist Feminism*, consolidates its theoretical object, materialist feminism, as a second wave concern through its inclusion of work by Margaret Benston, Mary Alice Waters, and Selma James.²⁰ But this respect for largely unknown writers and nonprofessional writings does not define the field. In *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, Linda Nicholson purports to assemble the central texts of the women's movement we call the second wave.²¹ However, she includes only two ephemeral texts in her selection (also the only ones to voice concern about revolutionary change), Radicalesbians' "The Woman-Identified Woman," first distributed in 1970, and the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement." Nicholson's volume also skips every professionally published essay between 1964 and 1974 with the exception of a brief excerpt from Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. Reemerging with Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women," Nicholson effectively mutes formative debates about how to define women's movement and enact feminism.

Nancy Fraser's most recent book, *Justice Interruptus*, has a related theoretical amnesia, one that might explain the chronological and ideological gap in Nicholson's volume. Fraser relies on the analytic paradigm of equality-versus-difference to constitute feminist theory as a body of knowledge and politics.²² Fraser's essay in the book, "Multiculturalism, Antiessentialism, and Radical Democracy," reassesses the philosophical boundaries of contemporary debates about social, political, and economic justice and finds them wanting. The recognition of differences, she contends, has overtaken concerns about the redistribution of resources. To counteract this disturbing trend, Fraser persuasively argues that feminist analy-

ses must once again address issues of political economy. An analysis of political economy would provide a more complex, critical, and long-term view of social transformation, one that can revitalize these neglected facets of feminism. She outlines the theoretical legacy of American second wave feminism from the sixties onward and draws upon its animated debates over equality and difference to support her proposal.

Fraser characterizes the questions of second wave feminism through a thematic time line. In the early stages of the second wave women's movement, feminism debated equality-versus-difference; from the mid-eighties, differences between women; and since the early nineties, multiple and intersecting differences. Fraser sets up a misleadingly causal relationship between early debates about women's equality with the intellectual inquiries that followed. These reformulations in feminism regarding differences between women and intersecting differences among women, Fraser argues, undermined the dominance of equality as a political goal. Equality, in Fraser's description, presumes that women's status should be commensurate to men's. As a conceptual focus, equality aims to end gender difference (as *the* basis for discrimination against women) altogether.²³ Fraser describes how equality, as feminism's political and analytic lens, discredited another strategy: revaluing gender differences, both cultural and biological.²⁴

To lump the first ten-plus years of second wave feminism, from the mid-sixties to the late seventies, into the rubric of equality-versus-difference (a formulation first articulated in the early eighties) is to truncate severely the political memory of the women's movement.²⁵ Unfortunately, due to the influential (and often brilliant) essay by Ann Snitow, "Pages from a Gender Diary," about early radical feminism, and the history by Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, among other recent accounts, feminist scholars have collapsed rich debates about equality, liberation, and freedom into a dichotomy between equality and difference.²⁶

As a means to order disparate positions, writings, and campaigns, 'difference' provides an attractive framework, since it can refer to contestation over dichotomized biological difference, essentialist differences between women and men, and political separatism. Both Snitow and Echols write about a vocal fragment of the women's movement, a fragment, even, of the more general denomination "women's liberation movement." They discuss a feminism often called "radical" at the time, growing out of the youth movement on campuses and in the South. Although neither Snitow nor Echols claims to write about the whole of the early women's movement, radical feminism increasingly stands in for that wide spectrum of politics. Perhaps equality-versus-difference explains a central debate within radical feminism, but this characterization is too limited for the range of questions faced by the women's movement as a whole. The women's liberation movement, understood as those groups identified by name, and more generously conceived as a non-contiguous set of political formations, rises from another question, about what kind of movement to build. Reform-versus-revolution, as a question of possibility and invention, characterizes the stakes of early second wave feminist debates with much greater accuracy than does equality-versus-difference.²⁷

Fraser's truncation of second wave feminism and Nicholson's forgotten period encompass some of the largest political fights launched by feminists, over the Equal Rights Amendment and comparable worth, and struggles within feminism over structural racism, lesbians, and sexuality in the movement. Theoretically, this erasure of goals, ideas, and battles is more disturbing. This formative period in the late sixties to the mid seventies, with its widely disparate and unstable definitions of feminism, was a socioeconomically, racially, and substantively diverse (and contentious) period of feminist politics. From the early sixties to the early seventies, feminist writings grapple most directly with questions of conscious organization and the dialectical relationship between theory and practice. We lose, in effect, the chance to take the women's movement into account on its own terms.

As an analytic framework, equality-versus-difference can illuminate how the subjects of feminism position the women's movement through its vision of itself and the goals, strategies, and tactics it endorses.²⁸ Equality-versus-difference can explain movement separatism as an outgrowth of feminist analysis of the political economy of patriarchy. Equality-versus-difference admits the complex interconnections between theory and practice, but it forecloses the early women's movement as both subject and object of its construction. Revolution-versus-reform didn't encompass all early debates about the possibility of feminism or the women's liberation movement, but it can suggest formulations feminism still abides by, theories the women's movement still constructs itself around. Most importantly, reform-versus-revolution lays the groundwork for a valuable conceptual assumption in early second wave thought, one rare in discussions about feminism today: that of political organization and feminism.²⁹

Disparate views on the political economy of women and women's liberation fueled the debate over how to build revolutionary rather than reformist politics. This argument raged throughout the mid-sixties to the seventies and spanned Leftist political movements and campaigns.³⁰ With the exception of Fraser's resuscitation of political economy, these once fiery positions and counterpositions in the women's movement have left very few theoretical traces in the writings of academic feminism.³¹ Feminism of the late nineties has not renounced its historical beginnings in impassioned speeches, innovative campaigns, and combative guerilla theater, but we have lost much of their content. The force of recent analyses and their targets of critique have been remembered in abbreviated ways that simplify their goals and strategies. Most glaringly, we have forgotten the subject of these debates: the collective movement itself.

Insights generated by understanding political economy enabled early projections of the women's liberation movement and lent definition to ongoing movements and their socio-political contexts. These insights helped theorists and activities to envision that movement's unrealized possibilities and to elaborate its strategies and long-term goals. When we ask about the WLM and its conditions of possibility, debates over reform-versus-revolution center on the movement's form, method, analysis, and structure. From a question about the unstable and embattled subject in politics we must ask about the production of an entire range of

political processes. A study of organization, in Lukács's terms, "makes conscious" the movement's theoretical assumptions about its politics.

ORGANIZATION AND STRUGGLE

Early debates about the political economy of women and women's liberation opened rich discussions about feminism as the basis for a revolutionary movement. But an understanding of political economy alone does not shed light on how to enact the possibilities uncovered. We have reached a theoretical impasse, without terms to discuss the present forms of politics, the tools of political engagement, or where these formations might lead.

In political theory, the clearest discussion of how to enact and imagine politics is in debates between Lukács, Lenin, and Luxemburg from the 1900s through the 1920s.³² While they debate problems of the constitution of a vanguard, proletarian, democratic-centralist communist party, nonetheless their discussions raise questions of organizational form more generally. For our purposes, the categories of organization and struggle are of the most use. Organization prefigures that political possibility, a women's movement, and suggests how women as a political category generates its own possibilities for a movement in three ways: as a scope of study, an analytic category, and a methodology. As a scope of study, organization blurs distinctions between theory and practice, but not through the deconstruction of this dichotomy. Instead, as the site where theory meets practice, organization attempts to understand their dialectical interdependency.

Analytically, organization allows us to examine what theories that animated early WLM politics, and gives us the means to trace how early second wave feminist ideologies about revolutionary politics both enabled and limited decisions made by feminist activists. In this discussion, I trace two analytic concerns to help refigure feminism and women's liberation movement as collective bodies. The first, representation, raises questions about the accountability of the movement to its own theories of social transformation. As theory must be accountable to—that is, represent—the ideals and goals of a movement, so too the movement must work to answer its own ideological demands. The second, leadership, is related since it asks, What determines feminism, theory or practice? Questions of organization and leadership help to elaborate that much-commented-on quality of feminism: its diffuseness, its lack of discrete boundaries, and its conscious embrace of the contingent and sometimes momentary political object-status.

As a methodology, organization sheds light on causal relations between a movement and its social context. The political imaginary is a realm of theoretical ideals that limits and enables a movement as much as its material conditions do. In the case of the WLM, the commitment to women meant that revolutionary affiliations were bound to incremental reformist struggles, like the fight for child care.³³ In addition, even when the WLM theorized itself as a separate movement, it could not divorce itself entirely from the larger arena of political struggles and retain its revolutionary (as opposed to reformist) ideals.³⁴ Also, methodologically,

an organizational analysis severely curtails the predominance of subject-centered political agency. A study of organization suggests how the women's liberation movement produces its subjects of politics even as those subjects create and sustain the movement. Women, even as activists or supporters of the WLM, are as much a construction of the movement's theories and politics as any material conditions that construct women as a social grouping.

Lukács, in his essay "Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organization," defines organization as a "dialectical category."³⁵ "Organization is the form of mediation between theory and practice. And, as in every dialectical relationship, the terms of the relation only acquire concreteness and reality in and by virtue of this mediation."³⁶ Lukács uses the two terms "form" and "relation" simultaneously to describe it. As a form of mediation, organization refers to an object; but as a relation, organization refers to active processes. Both aspects constitute the colloquial inferences of organization; first, that it is a thing, and second, that it is something one does (Lukács calls both aspects the "technical parts" of organization). Yet organization exceeds both of these colloquial senses as the site for a dialectical relationship where theory and practice interact. Theory and practice are not situated in opposition to each other, nor hierarchically in relation to each other, but are interdependent *in the form of organization*. Organization is always about political construction: its forms and theories.

Organization here does not merely refer to the specific groups in a larger movement, nor does it refer to the various processes of agitation. That is, organization does not provide the means to catalogue the collectivities that are part of a political landscape. So, the National Organization of Women (NOW) is not an example of organization's mediation between, say, academics and activists, but one example of a political organization among many. Nor is organization a coded reference to organizing, or a pure act of doing politics (often in opposition to just thinking about politics, as in the case of the much-reviled "armchair Marxists"). Organization is neither as substantively thing-like as a political group, nor as spontaneous and diffuse as acting out one's beliefs. Organization, in the Marxist tradition, has a richer meaning than either description can account for.

Both colloquial definitions of organization operate as simple referents, seemingly transparent actions or things that dismiss the possibility (or need) of theorizing them. Part of their transparency has to do with the self-evidence of the qualities that define them: whether it be a group's charter document or the motions of handing out leaflets. In addition, organization in both senses reinforces a reified definition of politics against a necessarily idealist theory, even though both the distribution of leaflets and the production of a charter document involve theoretical labor. To join (or, better yet, to form) an avowedly political group is to enact one's ideological affiliations just as much as agitating for changes in working conditions. Both colloquial senses of organization, at the outset, embody politics. In this manner, they reinforce rather than mediate the split between theory and politics.

One place to begin a counterdefinition is the title of Lenin's volume of essays that debate ongoing questions of revolutionary versus reformist organization in

Marxism: *What Is to Be Done?*³⁷ Organization, in Lenin's writings, is not just the empirical details and accruals of politics. Instead, organization is a variegated field, a site of many parts, wherein theory and politics have mutually dependent roles. Three basic parts of organization emerge from Lenin's work, illustrated by his book's title. The title contains a theoretical imperative within a question of constructive tasks. Lenin asks a question about organizing, What must revolutionaries do? However, the verb *to be* forestalls the actual processes of doing to ask not only what next, but *why choose* that course of action. In Lenin's account, viable organizing needs a long-term vision, and participants must ask not only what should be done today, but what should be done for tomorrow—given the conditions of the political economy. Organizational questions cannot end at what is possible in the present conditions, but must project how a revolutionary movement can shape the conditions of the future.³⁸ As an interrogative, *What is to be Done?* demands an analysis of the present situation, a theory about what to strive for, and a plan describing how to build from present conditions toward future goals. Organization encompasses all three of these projects.

Two theoretical issues emerge from this definition of organization: representation and leadership. On the question of representation, the debate centers on the group or movement as the *collective representation* of politics and of its members. But the movement/group is as responsible for its promises, goals, and strategies as it is for the carrying out of its members' will or interests. The women's movement did not arise solely from a few charismatic or far-seeing people, nor from a well-spring of support by a mass constituency. The women's movement gained form from its self-definition, through its campaigns, goals, and ideals. Organization as an analytic focus produces greater accountability of a movement to its members and leaders, since it reveals how a movement or group constructs itself, its forms, ideals, and program. A revolutionary understanding of political organization transcends populist-democratic theories of representation, which simply demand the accountability of leaders to members (or the elimination of leader/members, the member-as-leader and vice versa). The question shifts from "who leads the movement" to "what leads the movement" and focuses on the movement's theoretical commitments over powerful leaders.³⁹

Liberal models of political organization suggest two diametrically opposed alternatives: structure versus agency. The view of political organization as structure argues that the collective is paramount, and individuals are subordinate to the group as a monolithic entity; the view of political organization as agency proposes a model where the collective is the sum of autonomous individuals. This antimony dismisses the dialectic of individual/group, since individuals form and work in groups, but they are also produced by these relations. Therefore, a dialectical approach to the question of collective representation needs to be elaborated for political organization to mediate (rather than just enact or concretize) theory and practice.

Likewise, a movement must be accountable not simply to its membership or its leadership, but to its own visions and goals for social change. A result of

organizational accountability: the movement is understood through its own terms. Rather than being an inert (and omnipotent) object or simple addition of forces and people, the collective movement has a logic and a dialectic of its own. Political subjects produce the movement, that is, they build the structures of governance and develop the terms of political engagement. But this movement produced by political subjects also projects its political subjects and subjectivities. This conception of political organization does not denigrate agency within political formations, nor the choices involved in political acts. It does, however, subvert causal, deterministic, or fatalistic explanations for any movement. This understanding of political organization diminishes control (assumed to reside in individuals and collections of individuals) over the movement. Political organization, as a collective formation, must carry the weight of its production and reproduction. An organizational analysis requires an abstract collectivity that is neither individualistic nor a sum of its parts, but one that represents that imagined whole, the movement. This alternate conception of a movement or group accounts for its effects through its theoretical production. In this sense, an analysis of organization suggests future possibilities and goals based on a political theory of what is to be done.⁴⁰ Thus, an analysis of organization makes visible the mechanisms of decision-making and representation at work, even those of a diffuse, ever-shifting movement.

Rosa Luxemburg introduces the regenerative possibilities for organization in spontaneous struggle. To understand the forms within the WLM in the United States, Luxemburg's careful delineation of struggle as part of, but also separate from, organization provides valuable insights. In *The Mass Strike, The Political Party and The Trade Unions*, first published in 1906, Rosa Luxemburg defines organization through its centrality to leadership, a leadership which can produce its own forms of struggle. But she also celebrates the untamed methods of struggle, forms that did not ground themselves in their relation to theory. Struggle, Luxemburg emphasizes, is not synonymous with, nor should it be wholly subsumed by, the site of organization. Organization produces consciousness about how decisions are derived and how the party or movement embodies the goals and insights it builds in practice/theory. Struggle, in relation to organization, may or may not manifest the goals and methods of revolutionary politics.

Luxemburg concentrates on how the vitality of struggle complicates any simple notion of political leadership and organization. In her support for an unorganized form of struggle, the mass strike, she argues that organization, or those movement politics accountable to its theories, must draw from its ingenuity. She writes, "[T]he apparently 'chaotic' strikes and the 'disorganized' revolutionary action after the January general strike is becoming the starting point of a feverish *work of organization*" (her emphasis).⁴¹ Mass strikes themselves do not create revolution, nor do they produce revolutionary changes. Instead, they produce the conditions for the organizational work to begin, and can enable other forms of political leadership to arise. If analyzed in relation to organization, struggle can develop from unanticipated, spontaneous actions into conscious politics.

Luxemburg criticizes the Social Democratic Party (SDP)'s solely technical understanding of struggle. "The rigid, mechanical-bureaucratic conception cannot conceive of struggle save as the product of organization at a certain stage of its strength. On the contrary, the living, dialectical explanation makes the organization arise as a product of the struggle."⁴² By positing a dialectical relationship between struggle and organization, Luxemburg argues for a wider category 'politics' to include myriad forms of opposition. Luxemburg's open-ended definition of politics allows even early, inchoate feminist formations to be included in an assessment of the women's liberation movement. The WLM began with unorganized struggle, but only became a movement through organization. Through a name and self-conception, the WLM gained its shape-shifting organizational form, only possible because the movement(s) never wholly rescinded the claims of unorganized struggle. Organization never fully led feminist struggle in the women's liberation movement.

REVOLUTIONARY PRECONDITIONS AND PREDICTIONS FOR SECOND WAVE FEMINISM

To pluck the phase *reform-versus-revolution* from the women's movement archives, in some respects, is arbitrary. The phrase functioned more like a slogan (though not one for posters or rallies) than a well-structured argument for particular feminist goals or politics. In fact, this term rarely shows up in professionally published essays about the women's liberation movement, but it captures the framework of written arguments about the women's liberation movement between 1965 and roughly 1973. While the term *revolution* remained after 1973, it no longer shaped itself in opposition to reform. This struggle between reform and revolution led to the conceptualization of a movement that favored the goal of liberation over equality. As a snippet from another time, reform-versus-revolution does not embody the whole story of early second wave feminism; instead, the phrase reveals a set of constructions and a political trajectory the women's movement left behind. To ignore ephemeral sources is to miss the primary records of the feminist theory for revolutionary politics, and I cite these sources often not for their prominence, but their clarity. This national struggle/debate was waged through position papers, letters, underground journals such as *Leviathan* and *Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement*, groups' publications such as *National SNCC Monthly* and *Revolutionary Age*, and movement presses such as New England Free Press and Radical Women Publications.

As early as 1970, Marlene Dixon in her essay "Where are We Going?" targets the nexus between theory and politics as the means to build a women's movement.⁴³ Dixon, an astute observer of the early women's movement, denounces the quality of feminist theory at the 1968 conference for radical feminists in Lake Villa, Illinois, attended by movement activists from the United States and Canada.⁴⁴ She wrote about debates that pitted advocates of consciousness-raising against adherents of such tactics as guerilla theater and demonstrations. Her critique does

not target the often contentious character of the conference forums and papers, but focuses instead on the impoverished products of this dissent. She writes, “[T]he trouble was that none of these analyses, and this unfortunately especially applied to radical women, seriously linked theory and practice in such a way as to lead to strategies for action.”⁴⁵ Dixon pinpoints the disjuncture between theory and practice as the reason for aimlessness in the burgeoning women’s movement. While she does not call the confluence of theory and practice “organization,” Dixon argues that by linking theory and practice, analyses can produce strategies for the women’s movement in its acrimonious diversity. In her account of the 1968 conference, debates about the correct approach to the women’s movement lacked the means even *to lead to* ideas of, in Dixon’s words, “where to go.”

The 1968 conference was part of a movement that set itself apart from the interest politics of reformist groups such as NOW. Women’s liberation rejected the politics of women’s rights as a bourgeois movement to alleviate the excesses of capitalism without changing an exploitative system. Yet, within the revolutionary ascriptions of women’s liberation, organization as the nexus between theory and politics receded in the early to mid-seventies as a means to scrutinize feminist politics. Much of the movement in the mid-seventies took on a mystical quality, signifying women’s necessary, if presently incomplete, unity. But this analytic and political decline of efforts to build a feminist movement cannot stand as the summary of the early second wave women’s movement’s legacy. As the reform-versus-revolution debate illustrates, the essentialism of women and a correspondingly essentialist movement in feminism was not inevitable, but a site of contestation. The women’s movement, particularly its revolutionary strands, consistently questioned its own production of women and movement.

Juliet Mitchell wrote her enormously influential essay “Women: The Longest Revolution” before the women’s liberation movement had even named itself. Effectively, Mitchell’s essay announces the arrival of an organizational methodology for women’s liberation before any such movement had congealed. She begins from the dialectical possibilities within ‘women’s conditions’ that De Beauvoir so meticulously described in *The Second Sex*.⁴⁶ From De Beauvoir’s detailed history of social relations around gender, Mitchell builds an analytic category, woman’s conditions, to disrupt the timeless and inevitable qualities in the state of women. From women’s conditions as an analytic category, Mitchell constructs an analysis of the political economy of women that can build a political movement. For Mitchell, an examination of women’s conditions never remains at the level of what presently exists, but also probes what those conditions can produce. Mitchell asks how the conditions of women’s oppression can create the transformation.

Mitchell’s essay spares neither the party-based Left for its neglect of the woman question in its complexity, nor feminist theories for their lackadaisical attitude toward socialist transformation. She positions her essay as one that addresses the task left incomplete by De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*: the task of theorizing women through careful attention to organization.⁴⁷ Mitchell praises the scope and understanding of De Beauvoir’s work, but she criticizes the “muffled”

endorsement of socialism. She argues that De Beauvoir fails to give any indication of how socialism *could* produce any change: “[It] is not easy to see why socialism should modify the basic ‘ontological’ desire for a thing-like freedom which De Beauvoir sees as the motor behind the fixation with inheritance in the property system, or the enslavement of women which derived from it.”⁴⁸ She attacks the ahistoricity attributed to women’s conditions in De Beauvoir’s analysis, and, more importantly, she decries the lack of any organizational dynamic to change these conditions. Instead, Mitchell approaches the question that remains unasked in a seemingly foreclosed evolution of women in history: What contradictions in woman’s condition enable *opposition to* women’s enslavement?

Mitchell draws from Althusser to redress unsubstantiated visions of women’s emancipation within economist and ideological socialist analyses. She proposes the beginnings for an explicitly organizational theory of feminism:

What is the solution to this impasse? It must lie in differentiating woman’s condition, much more radically than in the past, into its separate structures, which together form a complex—not simple—unity. This will mean rejecting the idea that woman’s condition can be deduced derivatively from the economy or equated symbolically with society. Rather it must be seen as a specific structure, which is a unity of different elements.⁴⁹

Unlike her overview of De Beauvoir’s argument, which refers to *women’s* conditions, Mitchell uses the singular form *woman* to describe her own methodological prescription. Mitchell does not favor a closer or more accurate study into what women actually experience. Instead, as with the phrase *woman question* used in marxist writings, *woman’s conditions* refers to socially produced relations as a dialectical field of inquiry and potential opposition. Woman’s condition, in this sense, within its premise embeds the political transformation of that condition.

Mitchell does not predict the exact forms of the women’s liberation movement in her essay, but she does prefigure women’s liberation through her analysis of the political economy of women. Her radical rewriting of De Beauvoir can only imagine women as a political force through the dialectical relationship of woman’s condition in the social totality. Mitchell’s essay pushes a use of organization that analyses social totality to the fore of a liberatory analysis of woman. The political economy of woman’s conditions, for Mitchell, suggests a social totality rife with contradictions, a totality unstable enough for a revolutionary transformation.

The women’s movement, in Margaret Benston’s “The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation,” is still largely a subtext, defined more by such (particular) struggles such as the fight against sexism in the New Left, day care for working women, and reproductive rights, than by an overarching ideological vision. Many of these debates center around pragmatic questions of building a revolutionary women’s movement: how to relate to other revolutionary movements, whether to include all women’s struggles, and how to draw more women into revolutionary politics.⁵⁰ Early theories that address the political economy of women and

women's liberation do not answer the particular questions of the emerging movement. Instead, they ask more generally how reformist struggles can enrich a revolutionary political organization.

Benston wrote her article about women's liberation as a distinct movement even as the movement took shape in loosely connected groups around the country, but she was not the first to predict a revolutionary women's movement. Clara Fraser presented her explosive position paper about race and gender in social movements at the 1965 national convention of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP). She subsequently published the section on the woman question under the generic title "The Emancipation of Women."⁵¹ Her analysis of the woman question was one important ideological catalyst in the formation of the breakaway Freedom Socialist Party (FSP). Clara Fraser's paper lauds the civil rights movement for infusing social activism with revolutionary possibility. In addition, the paper does not just mention internal struggles for women's emancipation or its general character but predicts the formation of a radical women's movement out of the civil rights movement.

Fraser probably wrote (or at least edited) her essay after the distribution of Casey Hayden and Mary King's 1965 critique of sexism in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), "A Kind of Memo."⁵² Unlike Hayden and King, Clara Fraser does not solely attack sexism within gender-mixed organizations, neither does she imagine a unitary group's formation like NOW. She draws on her analysis of the political economy to produce her startling thesis: the revolutionary emancipation of women requires a separate movement. She credits civil rights struggles with providing "the training ground for the movement of women's emancipation, and each strengthens the other."⁵³ Fraser never delineates the scope of this women's movement; yet her prediction takes on an already embodied character through her use of the present tense: each movement already "*strengthens* the other" (emphasis added). In the blink of an eye, the civil rights and women's movements are not coterminous but separate movements. However, the preconditions for a radical women's movement lies with the production of activists in another struggle, one for black liberation. The movement for civil rights produces the preconditions for a radical women's movement. In Fraser's view these movements, though separate, are not in competition with each other, since she emphasizes the interdependency of their power. An analysis informed by political economy enabled the women's liberation movement. It allowed Mitchell, Benston, and Fraser to imagine such a movement was possible and necessary.

Not all theorists drew these conclusions from their analyses of the political economy of women or women's liberation. Joan Jordan, a member of the SWP, did not foresee a revolutionary movement for women, though after a women's movement arose she actively participated through the formation of such working women's groups as Mothers Alone Working and Women, Inc., in the Bay Area. Jordan projected an increase in women's bureaus to heighten working women's participation in unions, and a resulting pressure for the kinds of issues raised by those unions. She writes that it is "only in the last few decades that women's strategic

position, her assimilation in industry, has so altered as to make [that] emancipation an urgent necessity."⁵⁴ Jordan's analysis predicts an increase in women's leadership and push for emancipation within the labor movement and economic production more generally, but not the rise of a distinct movement.

Unlike when Mitchell, Fraser, and Jordan published their writings discussed above, by the time Benston's essay was published in 1969, the term women's liberation had gained currency and described a movement. This movement had a name but still struggled to imagine its contours. The movement had gained revolutionary goals and a separate status from other movements, but not a clear sense of the politics and groups it represented. For this named movement, Benston proposes another beginning that reinforces its indeterminacy as a movement:

We lack a corresponding structural definition of women. What is needed first is not a complete examination of the symptoms of the secondary status of women, but instead a statement of the material conditions in capitalist (and other) societies which define the group "women."⁵⁵

She breaks Mitchell's category woman's conditions into its parts: 'women' and 'conditions'. Women retains its historicity and contradictory place within capitalism, but women have no natural interests defined through these conditions. Women is wholly produced even in the term's plural form. As Benston states bluntly, the elaboration of women's experience of secondary status cannot sustain women's liberation. Benston further destabilizes movement, since neither biological sex nor the lived experiences of women grounds its formation.

Benston's analysis of women's relationship to the means of production is not just an exercise in marxist theory, but a polemic designed to guide the women's liberation movement. This aspect of her analysis, this prescriptive element in relation to a political movement, makes her political economy, as the title proclaims, a political economy of women's liberation. Benston argues that women are defined by a relationship to the means of production that is different than men's. She writes:

This assignment of household work as the function of a special category "women" means that this group *does* stand in a different relation to production than the group "men." We will tentatively define women, then, as that group of people which is responsible for the production of simple use-values in those activities associated with the home and family.⁵⁶

Unlike Mitchell, who attempts to provide an overview of the complexity of women's conditions, Benston focuses on the aspect of women's definition in relation to production. She confronts what Mitchell calls "economism," arguing that by jumping so quickly to the superstructural aspects of women's conditions Mitchell misses the importance of the relations of production to the women's liberation movement. Unlike Mitchell's, Benston's analysis supports a contingent category, women, for a liberation movement.

When Benston extends Mitchell's argument about the need for women to join the paid workforce, she states that two preconditions for women's liberation are based on this definition of women. First, a movement for women's liberation must bring private production into public production. Second, this public production should not merely be made more efficient through communalization, but made part of the public economy. She argues that the transition is not just to support women's economic and political independence, but to transform the relations of reproduction. Moreover, women, she writes, are also waged workers, but their relationship to the private and unwaged work of reproduction defines women as a socioeconomic category. Thus, for Benston, waged work, transformed by these two conditions, would change women.

Benston's argument for a revolutionary but diffuse movement for contingently defined women ran counter to more essentialist arguments about the WLM. A narrative of women's oppression grounded in the origins of that oppression imparted an ethico-political strength to Shulamith Firestone's theory of a separate women's liberation movement that leads all movements.⁵⁷ Firestone writes, "[F]eminists have to question, not just all of *Western* culture, but the organization of culture itself, and further, even the very organization of nature."⁵⁸ As a more deeply embedded oppression, Firestone argues that a revolutionary feminism leads all movements through the strength of its comprehensive ideology. Less concerned with foundations than with the translation of women's oppression into political goals and campaigns, Benston does not set up a competition between class exploitation and gender-based oppression. Instead, she imagines women's liberation as a movement, but as one related to a wider movement for revolution. She ends her essay with an admonition to Left feminists: "[O]ur task is to make sure the revolutionary changes in the society do in fact end women's oppression."⁵⁹

Benston celebrated an amorphous category 'movement' through her unstable category 'women'. But her detailed plan of action also attempts to envision what revolution meant for this movement, and what liberation could mean for women. For many early advocates of women's liberation, reform-versus-revolution confronted the elitist and racist assumptions within the demand for women's equality. Members of the women's liberation movement asked which men women wanted to be equal to, all men or white, privileged men. The first issue of *Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement (VWLM)*, Jo Freeman using the pseudonym Joreen attacks formal equality directly:

Women's liberation does not mean equality with men. Mere equality is not enough. Equality in an unjust society is meaningless. Inequality in a just society is a contradiction in terms. We want *equality* in a *just* society. . . . As women radicals we are involved with political issues because we realize that we cannot be free until all people are free.⁶⁰ (emphases in original)

Liberation as a goal redefined what equality meant in the context of social transformation. For Benston, liberation is a site of fuller capacities to end the oppressive relations that produce women. For Firestone, liberation will lead to "the

elimination . . . of the sex distinction itself.”⁶¹ The production of a just society, rather than the equal distribution of goods, is characterized by sociologist Marlene Dixon in 1970 as the difference between a demand to “let us in” and the fight to “set us free.”⁶² But liberation as an ideal does not explain what liberation means for that contingent group, women. In this sense, liberation is a lofty goal that defines a revolutionary movement. More specifically, as a theory about what should be, the ambitious goal of liberation has a more mundane side. That is, as a theory for political activism, a revolutionary movement for women means reformist struggles and an interdependency between revolutionary movements.

With important consequences, Benston and Joreen do not theorize the same movement, even as they both endorse its precepts of revolutionary change in women’s conditions and invoke the need for reformist struggles in a revolutionary organization. Unlike Joreen’s, Benston’s article illustrates the contingency of movement and a lack of rigid ideological and political boundaries. In contrast, the passage cited earlier from Joreen’s article in the *VWLM* presents another common understanding of less flexible distinctions. Joreen’s article illustrates cross-movement relationships that secured movement boundaries, though not the women who participated in them. The political issues Joreen speaks of seem to be those struggles not within the women’s liberation movement, or not immediately in the interests of women. The interdependency theorized in Joreen’s article departs from Benston’s less formally bounded visions of the WLM. Joreen’s formulation, unlike Benston’s, reiterates the boundaries that separate movements, even as she asserts their integral relationship. These two uses of movement, one which marks its perimeters, the other which refuses rigid definitions, both operated within early women’s movement politics of reform-versus-revolution.

The Berkeley Women’s Liberation’s Wednesday Nite Group, in its discussion paper, elaborates the distinction between revolution and reform as one of larger social visions supported by reformist politics. Entitled “The Nature of Change and Political Action—Reform vs. Revolution,” its paper describes the fight for day care as a goal “essential to fight for, since women cannot even be free to struggle if they are bound at home by their children.”⁶³ Revolutionary campaigns for reforms were premised on creating the conditions necessary to build a movement for women’s liberation. Position papers about women’s liberation recognize struggle as reformist in these campaigns and goals. Reformist demands, they argue, fight to produce the very possibility of a women’s liberation movement rather than solidify a movement-wide agenda. Day care, health care, and even economic independence are reformist goals, but they allow women to join a revolutionary movement. Still, the commitment to a revolutionary program rejects the possibility that incremental reforms can significantly change an exploitative system. If a movement’s goals are limited to a single issue, any campaign can become merely reformist.⁶⁴

Bread and Roses of Massachusetts expresses the aims of revolutionary political campaigns similarly. Equal rights are not a goal of women’s liberation, but a precondition for revolutionary movement. Kathy McAfee and Myrna Wood write about a range of campaigns for equal education, equal pay, good working

conditions, abortions, birth control, and the desegregation of institutions as campaigns which face “an inescapable empirical fact; women must fight their conditions just to participate in the movement.”⁶⁵ Reforms are not simply a first step, but a necessary beginning for revolutionary politics. As preconditions, reformist struggles produce a political stage for feminist activists and draw women into those campaigns for political strength. Even as they build preconditions for a revolutionary movement, women struggle collectively. The object and subject of the movement blurred as the personal limits placed on women became political battles. The personal, in this vision of reform for revolution, is political.

Due to the marxist tradition of questioning the preconditions for any political aggregation, the interests of women are not wholly self-evident throughout the women’s movement. Leftist theorists such as Juliet Mitchell, Clara Fraser, and Margaret Benston in the mid-sixties stress the preconditions that empower women’s oppositional (both reformist and revolutionary) politics and the theoretical imperatives necessary to build a political movement defined by woman. None of these theorists set the boundaries of their inquiry in terms of the political exigencies of existing groups. Their analyses of political economy provide the means to understand conscious politics—in their possibilities, their implementation, and their trajectories.

However, as Shulamith Firestone’s theory of feminist revolution illustrates, the categories woman and women can provide a fixity to the women’s movement that proposals of blurred organizational affiliation to revolution cannot. Women as a class/caste system unifies all women into one struggle for liberation.⁶⁶ Women as the primary form of oppression can lead all movements. Women can reinforce the differences between movements even as they lead them together. As a unifying category, perhaps the unifying category, woman and its plural form, women, contain a presumption of political solidarity and common goals—these presumptions operate alongside contingency, diffused boundaries, and incomplete unity. Women as a category of organization in the women’s liberation movement imperceptibly mutates from a site of complex socioeconomic relations and crosshatched modes of resistance/transformation into a uni-dimensional category of natural unity. These two visions competed for a movement fighting reformism as it aspired to revolution.

Reformist struggles with limited goals can be unorganized, rising from the exigencies of the moment, as well as conscious parts of organized politics. Struggle, as Luxemburg stresses, is not the same as organization, though struggle is a necessary component of organization. The women’s liberation movement shed its organizational focus when all struggles became equated with organization. Firestone’s popular rallying cry, “a revolutionary in every bedroom cannot fail to shake up the status quo,” is one marker of this shift.⁶⁷ The slogan “The personal is political” can refer to the process that brings individual struggles, those struggles “of the bedroom,” into collectively organized struggle. In Rosa Luxemburg’s vision, this process strengthens both organization and unorganized struggle. But when woman is an essentialist and separatist category, the personal is political can reify individuals’

struggles as the movement's totality. Firestone heralds the rise of a revolutionary movement, one stabilized by woman, and one that resides within the individual, not within the collective organization. Earlier reform-versus-revolution debates, as well as papers by theorists like Benston, remind us of our loss: a revolutionary movement that intersects with other struggles in a contingent but collective vision of feminist politics.