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Bringing Together Feminist Theory and Practice: A Collective Interview

*Heidi Hartmann, Ellen Bravo,
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Roberta Spalter-Roth, Linda Williams,
and Maria Blanco*

Introduction

THIS GROUP INTERVIEW was organized by Heidi Hartmann, director of the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), for the purpose of contributing to this special issue of *Signs* on the relationship between feminist theory and practice (for which she served as a guest editor). Hartmann invited participants she knew who had long been active in academia or advocacy or both and who represented several different areas of interest. The interview was held in Washington, D.C., on November 11, 1994, and lasted about four hours; participants responded (selectively) to a set of questions developed by Hartmann and circulated prior to the meeting. Unfortunately, because the meeting occurred shortly after the November 1994 elections and reaction among the Latina/o community to California's passage of Proposition 187 was strong, Maria Blanco, an attorney and law professor from California who works intensively on immigration issues, was unable to attend. She was asked to add her comments to the interview and has done so. The transcript from the interview was edited by Stephanie Aaronson, a former IWPR staff member now attending Columbia University; Sara Allore, a former IWPR staff member now attending the University of Massachusetts at Amherst; and Jodi Burns, a current IWPR staff member and recent graduate of Cornell University.

Participants. Ellen Bravo (EB), 9to5, National Association of Working Women; Charlotte Bunch (CB), Center for Women's Global Leadership

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at Rutgers University; Heidi Hartmann (HH), Institute for Women's Policy Research; Nancy Hartsock (NH), Department of Political Science at the University of Washington; Roberta "Bobbie" Spalter-Roth (BSR), Institute for Women's Policy Research; and Linda Williams (LW), Department of Political Science at the University of Maryland. Also present were IWPR staff members Sara Allore, Robin Dennis, and Melinda Gish. Maria Blanco (MB), Women's Employment Rights Clinic at Golden Gate University School of Law, has added her comments throughout the text.

Personal histories as they relate to feminist practice

HH: Welcome to all of you and thank you for coming! Even though we all know each other at least a little, I suggest we start by sharing our own personal history in the area of women's practice. In order to provide a model and to be as embarrassed as everybody else, I'll go first. My background in these issues probably starts with growing up poor to a single mother and going to an elite college, Swarthmore, where there were a lot of new Left activities: civil rights, antiwar, Students for a Democratic Society. I didn't get involved in the women's movement until 1969 when I went to graduate school in economics at Yale. New Haven Women's Liberation was meeting in town, not on campus, and it was very much a socialist feminist group. It was an incredibly exciting time for me because everything was new and growing overnight—women's liberation and the mimeographed articles that would come down to us from Boston or up from New York, the birth of the Union for Radical Political Economics and the rebirth of Marxism on campus, the birth of women's studies—all in a strong atmosphere of activism. The conjunction of all this helped me understand that what I was learning in school could actually be useful to women. A heady feeling.

After graduate school I taught for a couple of years at the New School for Social Research but soon moved into the public policy world. I worked at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights for two years and the National Academy of Sciences for eight years, writing about discrimination and comparable worth, among other issues. Then in 1987, I founded IWPR. That is all I am going to say by way of introduction. Which way do you want to go, left or right? Let's go left.

EB: Why not? The rest of the country is going the other way.

NH: Exactly.

CB: The roots of my activism are in Social Gospel Methodism. In the sixties, I went to Duke University in North Carolina where I became immersed in the Civil Rights movement. This was a transformation of what my missionary-oriented Methodist roots had meant up to that time. I was studying history but decided not to pursue graduate work because I

wanted to “make history instead of study history,” to put it in the “modest” sixties language that we all used.

I was at the Institute for Policy Studies [IPS] in Washington, D.C., for a long time. It was there I started *Quest: a feminist quarterly* and got to know Nancy. I did a lot of work in the seventies on feminist theory both at *Quest* and in early women’s studies activity.

NH: Let’s remember the Furies.

CB: Of course, the Furies. My early feminist history was in Washington. I was involved in the founding of the Furies, a lesbian feminist collective that had a brief flash of separatist brilliance in 1971–72 before we burned ourselves out. I was also one of the founders of Women’s Liberation in D.C., in 1968, which was my previous feminist activity.

At the end of the seventies, with the smell of Reagan in the air, I moved to New York and became involved in what is now called “global feminism.” I worked for about eight years as an independent consultant organizing international feminist workshops and activities with the International Women’s Tribune Center and various other women’s groups in the United States and elsewhere.

In 1987, I went to Rutgers University in New Jersey where I now direct the Center for Women’s Global Leadership. We work on issues of global feminism, with a focus on developing women’s leadership on public policy issues. We’ve chosen the field of women’s human rights as the place to explore that, and we do a lot of work with women and groups who are trying to bring women into international policy debates at the UN [United Nations] and elsewhere.

EB: I grew up in Cleveland on the wrong side of the rapid transit tracks. I decided that I didn’t want anything to do with the greedy, exploitative world I saw on the other side. I studied Greek and Latin literature and got involved in the Civil Rights and antiwar movements. My family is Jewish, and I grew up with the tradition that if you see something bad, you don’t stay silent. You get involved.

In around 1968 or 1969, I got involved in a women’s group in Montreal. My husband was Greek, and we were involved in the fight against the military dictatorship. I was the only woman and only non-Greek in the group. Then when my husband got a job teaching at a state school in Maryland, they let me teach women’s studies there. When I was teaching, my students came to me and said, “Okay, I agree. I did change my life, now I want to change the world. Where should we go now? What should we do?” But I had no idea what to tell them, and so I thought maybe I should go with them and figure it out too. My first husband and I moved to Baltimore and soon separated. Because I could type over one hundred words per minute, I got a clerical job. There, I tried to organize a union, did work in the community with women, and got involved in Left politics.

I also became interested in issues of comparable worth even though it didn't have a name then. I remarried and moved to Chicago. While I was doing this work, I kept looking for an organization like 9to5, [National Association of Working Women]. Finally, when I was living in Milwaukee, I hooked up with 9to5. I went to one of their summer leadership schools and realized that this was what I had been looking for: it was multiracial, it was grassroots, there were women leading, talking, doing things. They had a sense of humor. I felt this was the group I wanted, and I have been with them ever since.

BSR: I come from a working-class Jewish family, but, just to debunk the stereotypes, they were not politically active at all. Nonetheless, when I went off to college at Indiana University, the ordinary assumptions made by my family, which were largely liberal (not to say they didn't have their racism), were wide-eyed radical by southern Indiana standards. So, I became involved in the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and Young People's Socialist League as a way of starting to find a community there. There was no women's movement then.

I became involved in the women's movement in 1969 when I went to a D.C. Women's Liberation meeting. A few weeks later, I found out about *off our backs*, the local feminist newspaper, and I walked over. No one spoke to me for days, in the true method of sisterhood. But I stayed around and ended up working at *off our backs* for about four years, the most exciting years of my life. After I got a divorce, I could not afford to work on *off our backs* anymore, so I got a job at the Greater Washington Research Center, where I actually established the notion that one could do useful research on women for the local and regional area. Then I went back to graduate school to get a Ph.D., and, during this time, a group of us were successful in setting up a gender track within the sociology department at American University. About this time, I met Heidi in a D.C. Marxist feminist theory group.

Upon completion of my Ph.D., I got a job at George Washington University running the women's studies and policy track in the women's studies program. Then, in 1987 I joined the staff at IWPR, although I was still working part-time at George Washington University. I was offered a tenure track job at American University to set up another policy program, which I did. I resigned last spring so I could be at IWPR full-time.

LW: I considered myself quite a little feminist by the time I graduated from college. At Rice University, there were, by the time I left, about sixteen black students: fourteen were football players and two of us were women. So, when I went to graduate school at the University of Chicago, it seemed to me that there were zillions of black people. I had another black in my class; this was fantastic. At any rate, that was when I found out that there was a price to pay for considering yourself a feminist in the

black community. I turned off a lot of students, particularly black male students, who said that I was dividing the black community by even raising issues of women's rights. I don't think I changed my views, but, to be honest, I never read much feminist theory.

Currently, I teach in the Department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland, and I am the director of research for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. I would say that, unlike the rest of you, I haven't started any women's groups. I have worked on a number of projects, such as the Women's Voices project with the Center for Policy Alternatives and the Ms. Foundation. I have also written a number of articles on black women in politics. In general, however, I have done more on race issues.

NH: I grew up in a lower-middle-class family in Ogden, Utah. I was, like Charlotte, a Methodist, which in Utah, where everyone else was a Mormon, put me on the outside of everything. Then, I went to an elite women's college, Wellesley College. It was another world, but it was only years after I graduated that I was able to name the reason I never felt comfortable, which was class.

While I was in college, I was involved in the Wellesley Civil Rights Group, in which we did tutoring in Roxbury and Boston and worked with the Boston NAACP. I went to graduate school at the University of Chicago, a little bit ahead of Linda, and got involved with one of Saul Alinsky's community organizing groups, the Woodlawn Organization. In part because of my involvement with that southside group, I worked in anti-Daley machine electoral politics. My (first of many) losing candidate was Abner Mikva, now White House Counsel. That was also the year Martin Luther King brought the Civil Rights movement north to demonstrate that prejudice was not just a southern problem. I marched in those marches, which were really quite amazing events. I also helped to start a graduate student women's caucus in political science. We have a very short entry in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, which details the remarks that our professors made about us [Women's Caucus 1970].

Then, I had the misfortune to be the first woman hired by the University of Michigan political science department. After three years, in 1973, I moved to Washington, D.C., and took a course from Charlotte at IPS on feminist theory. I had never encountered it before. Then I was part of the original *Quest* staff: I was the subscription department and did some writing and editing as well. I think actually it is worth remembering what we were trying to do with *Quest*. We were trying to construct a platform for a political organization that would be to the Left of NOW [National Organization for Women], a typically ambitious sixties and early seventies project. Part of this involved getting activists to write about what they were doing, which was very difficult. It became clear after five or six years

that we didn't have the woman power to do that, although *Quest* lasted for almost ten years.

I also taught political science at Johns Hopkins and was a part of several efforts to begin women's studies at the university, which finally happened several years after I moved to the University of Washington in Seattle, where women's studies has now celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary.

MB: I became involved with the Chicano movement through MEChA [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan], a Chicano student organization, when I was a senior in high school in San Diego, California. While active in MEChA as a college student, I was part of a women's movement within MEChA to elevate women into leadership roles within the organization. At the time, in the early seventies, the Chicano movement did not have the many visible and accepted spokeswomen that it does today. We put together women's election slates and formed women's caucuses within major MEChA branches. We faced intense criticism from many inside the movement for pursuing what were viewed as divisive goals. In spite of the criticism, Chicanas organized statewide conferences in California, as well as national conferences, where we formulated positions on women's issues and strategies for taking these into the larger Chicano movement. Clearly, we had tapped into widespread anger about the sexism within the movement.

Like many other activists during this period, I dropped out of college (later returning) to do full-time community work. For more than two years I worked and did rank-and-file organizing in a garment shop that was 100 percent women and approximately 90 percent immigrant Latina women. In retrospect, this experience seems to have set the theme for my political activity since that time. It developed in me a deep appreciation for the abilities and issues of working-class women of color and the need to enlarge their political role. As a result, much of my focus, over the years, including my work as a civil rights lawyer/advocate, has been with this sector of working women. For the past five or six years I have worked in the Bay Area with the Immigrant Women's Task Force. This incredibly dynamic group has brought together community activists, lawyers, and service providers with the goal of bringing a women's perspective into immigration policy and advocacy, and, correspondingly, incorporating immigrant women's issues into the work of feminist and labor organizations.

What is your current relationship to feminist theory?

HH: I thought we could begin by discussing our current relationship to feminist theory. Although I have written a couple of articles that are

well known in socialist feminist theory, I moved into the public policy world soon after getting my Ph.D. I have worked primarily on women's employment and related issues. Since founding IWPR in 1987, I feel that I am primarily a practitioner albeit in the policy research context. I do not read much theory, like Charlotte. I think you were the one who said to me, "*Signs*? Who reads *Signs* anymore?" I feel the same way.

NH: *Signs* is moving to the University of Washington, and we intend to change that.

CB: My relationship to feminist theory is very ambivalent. I definitely see myself as a practitioner. In the seventies, I saw myself as both a practitioner and a feminist theorist. Today, I don't think I'm qualified to teach "feminist theory" because I don't know what it has become. It depresses me, but I do not find most of the theory being written today very helpful. As Heidi mentioned, I don't read journals like *Signs* anymore. I think there are useful things being written by feminists about what's happening in the world, what I would call feminist analysis. It's quite interesting, but it is not what is now called feminist theory.

MB: I also do not read what we are calling "feminist theory," with one exception—in the last couple of years I have been reading some critical legal theory articles that deal with the intersection of race and gender. It is my sense that this writing is more accessible than other theoretical feminist writing. Even while advancing theoretical arguments, the authors tend to pose and answer concrete questions.

EB: I am interested in knowing how feminist theory can be helpful to 9to5. How can we generate and sustain a movement focused on women's economic issues led by those most affected? How can we unite across race and ethnic diversity? There are many different types of feminist theory—how are they addressing these issues, or aren't they?

BSR: Now I do policy research: research that I hope will be used in the policy debates that affect women's lives. I think that my work is still influenced, as I think all our work is, by feminist theory and methodology—especially the notion of women creating their lives under conditions they don't control. My own view is that Marxist feminist theory has somewhat stopped developing and that most of the innovation in theory is taking place in deconstructionist theory, which I don't read.

MB: The articles that have proven useful to me often give examples of how legal arguments and public policy arguments need to and can be expanded to address women of color specifically. This form of writing may be due in part to the authors' formal legal training or to the fact that they have a largely legal audience. I'm really not sure.

LW: To be honest, I never read much feminist theory until two summers ago. At that time, I participated in the University of Maryland curriculum transformation project, in which you learn how to bring more

about women and people of color into your disciplines. We read mostly feminist theory for the first half of the six-week period. I found it incredibly interesting.

NH: I've been someone who is concerned about the deteriorating relationship between feminist theory and practice. In 1992, there was a roundtable at the Western Political Science Association where several feminist theorists expressed the view that feminist theory had become much too esoteric, much too difficult to understand, much too disconnected from practice, and much too much into deconstruction. My participation in that meeting was preceded by my coteaching the first course in feminist theory for the graduate certificate in women's studies at the University of Washington. I cotaught the course with a colleague in the English department, and fifteen of our twenty students were from the English department. They were excellent students and worked hard to produce publishable papers over the course of a quarter. Several of their papers have in fact appeared in print. Still, many of our conversations left me very disturbed about the current state of feminist theory. The students kept talking about how you can't name anything because things shift; you can't talk about "we" because who are "we"? Even when "we" referred to twenty graduate students at the University of Washington. So I came into the Western Political Science panel thinking that we had to do something. The discussion lasted throughout the three-day meetings, until some of us decided that we wanted to talk to people who were practitioners. Remember, we used to do it all. So we organized a session with a number of people from Chicago Women in Trades and a couple of other groups for the following year. That meeting was really interesting. The former activist/theorists had become professional academics, while other activists had become professional organizers. It was an example of what twenty years did to feminist theory and practice and raised important questions about what it would take to put them back together in some way.

MB: I share Nancy's feeling that other academic feminist theory is for the most part completely esoteric and inaccessible and therefore, for me, not useful. I also agree that if the definition of theory were expanded to include more popular forms of communication (including fiction written by women), we would find that activists actually not only read feminist theory and put it to use but also produce some of that theory. For example, in the area of immigrant women, activists have contributed to an expanded definition of what constitutes a "feminist" issue, not only through their work, but also by writing about their work in newsletters and conference papers.

HH: Maybe professionalization affects even what we label as feminist theory. In the old days, we might have called all of the feminist analysis

done by these activists feminist theory; now only the things that say “I’m a feminist theory article” are considered feminist theory.

Is the feminist movement everywhere or is it dead?

BSR: I think that is a very political question. We want to call everyone a feminist, even if they don’t self-declare, to say that the women’s movement is inclusive, while our opposition would like us to be as small and as exclusive as possible. They would like us to be white elitists. So it is in our interest to claim as much as we can, unless people beat us over the head and say, “No, if you ever call me a women’s movement person again, I’ll . . .”

CB: It all depends on what the claiming is. I agree with you that when I talk about the women’s movement, I claim a very broad spectrum, but it’s also important that the people who we are claiming, claim it.

BSR: Right, I think that we want to be in the business of claiming as well as trying to get people to accept the label.

NH: Many people are excluded from consideration as part of the feminist movement because they don’t label themselves feminist, but they are women consciously working to empower themselves and other women. I think they should be considered part of the women’s movement.

LW: You will probably remember that what came out of the Ms. Foundation/Center for Policy Alternatives Women’s Voices survey was that if you looked at the content of people’s beliefs and demands, then the vast majority of all racial groups (women and men, but women more so) were feminist; however, if you asked them were they feminists, then nobody was a feminist. They would not claim that label at all.¹

EB: I have a very hard time saying “the” women’s movement. I think there are at least seven parts of it. I don’t really know how we can talk about it without making distinctions.

LW: I think, like Ellen says, that there are many different women’s movements that are never completely congenial. I think that there is a black women’s movement that is pretty much still separate from most

¹ Among female respondents to the poll, only 2.0 percent said they spend their spare time participating in feminist organizations. About one-third said they would be very likely to participate in or give money to women’s organizations working on equal rights for women, while about one-quarter said they would do so for feminist organizations. Sixty-nine percent of women said the women’s movement had made things somewhat or much better for women; on average, women rated women’s organizations favorably, whereas they were neutral toward feminist organizations. Finally, three-quarters said the country would be somewhat or much better off if half the leadership positions were held by women (Ms. Foundation for Women and Center for Policy Alternatives 1992; Greenberg-Lake 1992).

working-class white women's movements and certainly from middle-class white women's movements.

HH: When I formed IWPR and started meeting with the national women's groups based here, I was shocked that, in Washington, [D.C.,] NOW is considered radical. They are thought to be too oriented toward mass action and not enough toward the mainstream techniques of lobbying. It is interesting how things change: NOW moved from the extreme Right of the women's liberation movement in 1970 to the extreme Left of the mainstream women's movement today.

CB: How the center has moved.

NH: It is interesting to think about the center moving. The center of the women's movement really has moved *Left*, whereas the center of politics, as of yesterday, seems to have moved Right.

BSR: I think that is absolutely true.

CB: What do you mean that the center of the women's movement has moved Left?

NH: Just think about D.C. NOW or even the national NOW and the kinds of positions that they take. For instance, multiculturalism is important.

CB: It is not enough just to say that multiculturalism is important. The important issue is what do you mean by multiculturalism and how is it integrated into practice?

BSR: A former student, Ronnee Schreiber, and I did an article on feminist organizations, entitled "Outsider Issues and Insider Tactics" [Spalter-Roth and Schreiber 1995]. I agree with Nancy. Even during the 1980s, a conservative political period, the women's organizations did not move to the Right; they moved to the Left. For organizations like AAUW [American Association of University Women], which may not sound so Left, abortion became one of the top-ranked issues. That was an issue on which they had not taken a stand for fifty years. Multiculturalism also became important, and organizations were spending money on it. It is not so easy for women's organizations to get money, and they were spending money on programs, recruitment, outreach. You may argue that it is totally misguided to try to bring women of color into white women's organizations, but, however misguided, it clearly was a commitment made by all nineteen organizations we studied. Even the issue of lesbian rights was broached by members in these organizations. Now, some of these organizations are working on issues such as welfare and labor law reform. So there just seemed to be no evidence that there was not a general movement to becoming a more progressive movement.

CB: I think the women's movement is everywhere now. However, it is everywhere in a way that does not lend itself to simple description. I agree with Ellen—I do not like the expression *the* women's movement. Instead,

I often talk about women or women in movement. There is an enormous amount of decentralized grassroots activity by women that may or may not call itself feminist, but which is informed by feminist debate, discourse, and consciousness. Sometimes this activity takes place in women's organizations, but often it happens outside of these groups. In my experience of both international and domestic economic justice groups, many at the grassroots level are increasingly led by women. These women leaders see themselves as strong women, but their work is not necessarily exclusively relating to women. At the same time, they often use a women's approach or feminist analysis in what they are doing.

For example, at the Center for Third World Organizing in San Francisco, very interesting feminist practice is taking place outside of a women's organization. Similarly, a considerable amount of women's energy is put into immigrant and refugee rights groups, sometimes explicitly relating to women, sometimes not.

LW: I certainly agree with Charlotte that the women's movement is everywhere. The reason this makes the movement weak is that the movement is everywhere without any attempts to glue it together. There are many goals, but with many goals we need to prioritize. All goals do not have to have equal priority.

MB: Perhaps I am an optimist; however, I do not think the feminist movement is anywhere close to being dead. In fact, more than ever I see women organizing as women around a variety of social issues, even if not around traditional "feminist" issues. Examples in California include environmental justice groups formed by women of color and focused on women and environmental justice; two or three immigrant women's groups, again, formed by women and focused on issues affecting immigrant women (labor issues, immigration policy, health); and a newly formed women farmworkers' group. It could be argued that these organizations or movements are not traditionally "feminist" because they are not movements for women's equality. But for women to organize as women around different issues implies a self-consciousness as women, which is an aspect of feminism. And more to the point, these grassroots women's organizations are explicitly organizing around principles of equality. Many of the organizations formed precisely because the members believed that advocates/activists (environmental, labor, immigration) had excluded the experience of women, and, as a result, policy proposals and political platforms do not incorporate the needs of the women. These new women's organizations I am describing here are limited to women of color organizations, particularly of Latinas, and I don't know if this development is broader. However, even in mainstream electoral politics, recent women candidates have identified and campaigned around women-specific issues. In some instances this has not necessarily been a

progressive trend. But then again, there has always been disagreement about whether feminism is intrinsically progressive.

EB: The critical question for me is, What is the base of the organization and what is the focus of the organization? Is the focus of the organization what happens to the lives of the majority of women? I think there are many different pieces in the women's movement. There is still a part of the women's movement that is activist based; it is essentially middle class, predominantly white, and focuses on abortion. Another section of the women's movement is policy oriented. These groups do good and important work, but they have no real grass roots; they are detached from the base. Finally, there are groups at the grassroots level. Some of them work at the national level, but most are local. Some work primarily in communities of color. Not all of them have the word feminist or even the word women in their names. They are doing important organizing, and they are largely invisible. When the media say *the* women's movement, they do not mean these groups, and they should. That is one of the main things I would like to see reversed. I would like to see theorists explain why the women's movement is defined in such a limited manner and then help change how it is defined.

NH: Could you give us a couple of examples?

EB: Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates, La Mujer Obrera. There are Native-American groups, African-American groups, southerners—for example, Southerners for Economic Justice. Southerners for Economic Justice is not a women's group; it is mixed. There are several Asian groups, and some of them do not have names relating to women; they are called workers' centers, or something similar. Nonetheless, you will often find women in leadership positions, and many of these groups have women's rights units. There are scores of them. Some of them have formal structures and are connected with each other in interesting ways, while others are very weak, without much infrastructure and certainly without many resources.

LW: Economic issues provide a good example of a place in which the women's movement, however defined, does not seem to have really looked at issues that affect women who are not in the middle class. Whereas your average woman on the street of any race, and to a large extent any class, is much more likely to focus on economic issues within the context of the family, within the women's movement, economic issues tend to get downplayed in favor of issues like reproductive choice. The average woman in the surveys is less likely to focus on the issues that are most identified as women's issues.

HH: The frustration that we have had at IWPR is that the issues that we have tended to focus on, loosely called economic issues, do not seem to get the same priority and visibility, even though they are so paramount

in polls of women. But, if you give a speech and say economic issues get less visibility because women's groups are not working on them, many people in the audience get very upset and argue that they *are* working on them; they say it's simply difficult to get attention for their issues. The specialized groups like Wider Opportunities for Women, the National Displaced Homemakers Network, 9to5, and the National Committee on Pay Equity have spent twenty years on these very issues, including employment opportunity and more pay for women. Why is it that we cannot define this as the center of the women's movement? It still seems, even to those of us who are working on economic issues, that the center of the women's movement is the abortion rights marches that were held around the *Webster*, and related, court decisions.

CB: Yes, a lot of work has been done on economic issues right from the beginning, but they are the issues that the social structure is the most resistant to changing. Part of the reason that people keep saying the women's movement is not working on economic issues is because not enough is changing.

Furthermore, organizations working on economic issues do not have the same visibility because they are not allowed to have the same visibility. There is some press manipulation of what is made visible. They want to see the women's movement as limited to a narrowly defined set of issues; so, when women are working on economic issues, they may not be defined as the women's movement, even if they define themselves as a part of the movement.

NH: In some sense, the issue is simple: women are bodies. Therefore, the issues that concern women have to be the issues that concern reproductive rights and images of women's bodies like the culture of thinness. In retrospect, I wonder whether we are limiting the debate by focusing on issues. Maybe we should look at the question, What is feminist practice? Then we might be able to answer my particular question, What can feminist theory do to inform these various practices that we agree are important feminist practices?

EB: I think part of the problem relates to the question, What is the goal? There is a difference between trying to win some change on certain issues and trying to build a movement.

BSR: Why *the* goal?

EB: I do not mean capital *t*, capital *g*.

BSR: Many goals.

EB: There are many goals, but what should underlie our work, in my mind, is building a movement led by the people most affected by the problems that we face. I would start with that because any gain you make on an issue, you may lose during the next round of elections. There is always going to be progress and loss, but there can be more progress if you are

successful at building, at empowering people, and at teaching people to find their voice and to appreciate their skills or learn new ones. It is also important to let the people affected define their own agenda.

How can women's groups work across diversity?

CB: Professionalization has required people to become specialists, and so the separation between groups is greater now than it used to be. For instance, Washington policy groups and national organizations do very good work, but they often do not have much connection to the grass roots. People working in local groups have the sense that national and international organizations are defining issues without them. In the meantime, in these policy organizations, we think we are taking their experiences into consideration because we meet with them occasionally or read their newsletters. This miscommunication arises because there is a structural separation between the arenas in which we work.

In the last year, we have been trying to work with domestic, decentralized, grassroots groups on women's human rights. We had a three-day strategic planning meeting with groups working on violence against women and economic justice to talk about using international human rights concepts and instruments at the grassroots level in the United States. We had a wonderful conversation in which we tended to agree about what is going on in the world and what kind of action is needed. However, in the end, although the grassroots groups were intrigued by the human rights approach, it was not the analysis they used in their day-to-day work. Moreover, some were not sure it was worth the effort it would take to get people to see violence, for example, as a human rights issue. There were legal impediments as well, since U.S. law is not based on international human rights law.

There are many structural impediments to linking the work of various groups. I think that is because everyone works in their own separate box. In trying to figure out how we can use international human rights law to hold corporations accountable, we asked how that might work, say, in a small town in the South when they move their plant out. The complexity of doing that was so incredible that some said, "If you can come in and bring people to do that, terrific, but we have to do daily organizing." We do not have that in-between layer of people, the connective tissue needed to mate the global to the local successfully.

LW: The women's movement has to deal with how to end the compartmentalization made of our professionalization. One of the reasons we are so weak is because we are split up in many different parts. This is also one of the reasons that the enemies of feminism, however defined, have been able to divide us and become so much stronger themselves. There

are women who are interested in politics, who are interested in economic justice, who are interested in all kinds of cultural and social issues. By and large, when you go to women's meetings, they are segregated by group interest. If you go to the Council of Presidents meetings, the people are interested in electoral politics; if you went to the 1994 Barnard meeting, "Women, Work and Family in a Changing Economy," you tended to find people interested in economic issues. And, yet, it takes putting all of these people together for the women's movement to be perceived as a strong force. How, then, do we deal with a movement that is everywhere in a way that shows the strength of that movement?

NH: That is a good question. If you say the women's movement is everywhere, it turns out to be nowhere. There is not one group or one place to which you can point and say this is what women are doing. When the women's movement becomes part of the fabric of social life, it becomes less identifiable, and therefore it loses a lot of power.

HH: I have an example of how hard it is to coordinate even among these national women's organizations who have headquarters in Washington, D.C., which may be the first place the press calls. In Washington, we have an organization called the Council of Presidents, which Linda just referred to. I have some dim view of the history of it. Initially, it was an informal collection of only a few of the largest women's groups, whose presidents met to coordinate their strategies. This was during the Carter years, when there was some sense that we could accomplish things (for example, the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] was still viable), and, in fact, we were accomplishing things because the backlash was not as well organized at that time. Eventually, groups that were left out of the council wanted to be included. They argued, "Who are you to be speaking for all women? We all have our groups, too." The Council of Presidents was then formed on a somewhat more formal basis, open to all groups that endorsed the principles of action adopted in Houston, Texas, in 1977, as part of the U.S. activities following the 1975 International Women's Year. Many of the groups that joined were smaller, and the council became very big and diffuse. The presidents stopped attending; groups began to send their interns, not even their regular junior staff.

BSR: Which certainly could have had positive impact. You are training the next generation.

HH: That is true, but most people felt that the Council of Presidents was not doing anything, that it was a bulletin board. People came and said, "I am having this conference. I hope you will come." Recently, some of the member organizations have tried to improve the organization of the council so that it elects a chair and steering committee that can carry out policies between meetings; yet there is some opposition to this effort as well. This example does not touch on all the points we have been

discussing, but look at what a struggle it is just to try to get some unity of identity and purpose among groups based in Washington, D.C., all of whom self-identify as women's groups. This is a difficult problem for the movement right now. Or is this the way we are surviving the increasingly intense right-wing backlash? We just disappear into the fabric of society.

BSR: Maybe being in the fabric of society is not so bad.

NH: But it does basically say there is not a movement. I do not want to say that there is a movement, but I just do not even see a set of movements.

CB: I do not agree with that. I see many movements. Where I pick up the challenge of Linda's comment is how do these movements strengthen each other? Because to the degree that we are everywhere, we are not very well focused in terms of political power. I do not think there will ever again be only *one* movement. I am not even sure that is the goal, to have one women's movement. But I do think that there needs to be a better process by which the different groupings of women's specialized organizations and the different feminist practices can strengthen each other. There has to be an effort to open space for a larger number of women's voices in the various places that we need to be. No woman can speak for all of the movements; no woman should. Whoever does get to speak at any one moment can speak to what she sees, and also she can point to other women, making space for more people to be brought into the discussion. For instance, if we are working on violence and women's human rights, we seek to make connections between issues and argue that you cannot look at violence in isolation from the economic dimension of women's lives. I do not think saying we are all the same is the answer, but it is important to me to find ways to strengthen each other and to feel less separated.

How can feminist theory help us to form linkages among women? Defining commonalities

CB: I want to connect the need to work together to feminist theory and practice, because I feel this is one of the biggest challenges that we face. Feminist theory includes a lot of discussion about differences among women. The women's movement embodies this principle and its difficulties in practice. However, I feel that the theory debate is still reacting to the early days of feminism. It has not grappled with how theory about difference can strengthen all women and form a new basis of solidarity. For instance, a student who has been immersed in this theory comes to work in our office where we are organizing women to utilize and confront global policy systems like the UN. She immediately starts to question how anybody can speak for women, but the question totally immobilizes her. The theory has conditioned the student to feel that she cannot have a

voice. She is afraid that if she speaks, she will be accused of speaking for or ignoring somebody else. The theory has important truth in it, but it has become immobilizing because it has not been done in conjunction with practice. The theory is interesting, but it is not engaging with real-life situations.

I have a practical example. One of the main issues with which women struggle internationally is how to define human rights as universal, without making it sound like there are no differences between women. In many places, women are not willing to give up the concept of universal human rights because it is their only protection against the cultural relativism that is used to attack women's rights. So many women in other countries with whom we work are nervous about the way the difference discourse is going in the United States. They feel it undercuts our ability to talk about the universality of human rights: the notion that all women should have these human rights.

I do not see the feminist theory discourse in this country addressing the practical problem of how to bring women back together so they strengthen each other. We do not need to call for a single voice or view, but we do need to ask ourselves, What are our commonalities? When is a universal concept of humanity useful? I think feminist theory does not address these issues enough because most of the theoreticians do not understand the practical problems inherent in the theory. There needs to be more dialogue between those engaged in trying to make change in the world and those writing those theories.

NH: This gap between the theories you have and the theories you need is not a new one. For instance, one of the theories we had available over the years was the notion of human equality. The equality rhetoric was a very valuable tool to get our foot in the door, but women do have different needs and interests than men.

I, too, see my students immobilized by theories of difference. From a theoretical perspective, it seems to be immobilizing in a couple of different ways. First, there is the issue of how I can speak for anyone besides myself. This is part of the way in which the difference dialogue gets translated in the U.S. context in which individualism is all but sacrosanct. Second, the theory is also immobilizing because women's studies undergraduates learn about difference in a very academic setting, so that from the outset it is completely detached from activism. They learn the difference discourse in theory courses through French deconstructionism and post-structuralism.

CB: Exactly. The students do not learn about difference in terms of differences within a coalition.

LW: At a certain point, feminism does have to have some bottom-line definition. We interviewed a poststructuralist at Maryland for a job in

our department. She said that you could not even say feminism was about women's equality because that was giving a definition to the woman's role about which not everyone agreed. At that point, feminism becomes a concept without a real, positive meaning. I would argue that we should announce that the women's movement is dead but the women's coalition is (or maybe coalitions of women are) alive and well. We need this time together to defeat the enemies that are killing us right now, like the Christian Coalition, for example. Talking about a women's coalition would express that many different groups have come together around a central commonality.

BSR: We have to ask ourselves where this fear of speaking for others comes from, and if it is all bad. Within the parts of the women's movement in which I have spent some time, we have had a fairly long history of socialization that sanctions people for speaking for others, for using "all women" when we mean "primarily white women." When I write about welfare, I spend a lot of time feeling uncomfortable because I am writing up data about other people's lives. What right do I have to use this anonymous data collected on women's lives to speak about them? This feeling creates a sense of humility and a desire to participate in coalitions where I hear these women's voices.

LW: Speaking about or speaking for are two different things.

BSR: I think the line is pretty hazy, especially when you do policy research and you are coming out with recommendations.

LW: But then your recommendations are based on what you have learned from your research.

BSR: I feel and I have been taught that it is a good thing to question whether I have the right to speak. Will what I am saying help or hurt, and how do I know? I was trained, partly in the women's movement, to value this process of questioning. I think we have a set of positive values—such as self-criticism, humility, and sensitivity to others—but that perhaps we are seeing an extreme version of these values. Luckily, my students do not appear to be silenced by deconstructionism, which is why I do not seem to feel that it is as threatening as some of you do.

EB: I want to start with what Linda said because that is a theory I subscribe to—we need some bottom line. The majority of women have things in common. Racism, for example, objectively will not help me. There may be ways in which I benefit from being white on a day-to-day basis, but, in the long run, I do not benefit from racism. Because I do not experience racism, as a white woman, I do not have the *same* stake in fighting racism, but I do have *a* stake in fighting racism.

Part of the disconnectedness among groups is due to a lack of trust, for not just understandable but also legitimate reasons. We are not going to be able to work together more effectively until we address some areas

that have been problematic. Take, for example, the press. When you talk about your issue, you should not speak as the women's movement, but as some women in movement, and talk about other women in movement. When the press calls you, that D.C.-based group, do you say, "Have you spoken to the Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates (or another group)?" We do and should have as a goal that those most affected be acknowledged and seen as they struggle. We need to give them concrete support and resources. If you struggle to get all the resources for your own group, then you are not always putting the resources where they need to go.

LW: I think one of the things Ellen is saying is that it is almost impossible to help the worst off without improving the lives of all women.

HH: About a year and a half ago we had a meeting of the CEOs of some of the Washington-based women's groups who were focusing a lot of their work on economic issues. We came together to talk about whether or not we could effectively coordinate around these issues, by developing coordinated strategies and setting collective priorities. The groups that were the better heeled were the least interested in cooperating. One of the women in the room said something similar to what you said, "We need to get organized because we are being killed. We need to figure out how we can strengthen each other and be more effective." This woman even had the temerity to say that the working women of America expect us to do something for them—you could see the jaws drop in the room. Later, one woman who had been present said that it was almost as if the leaders of these larger organizations were saying, "The working women of America? Wait a minute, I am on the way to the White House, puhleeze." So maybe what Bobbie says is true. It would be better if there were more humility among all of these groups in terms of whom they think they speak for and what they should be doing.

CB: I have spent much of my life fighting for recognition of and respect for differences. The question is, In what context do you recognize difference, and what is your goal? My goal has been that people be able to work together better and not be immersed in their difference. During my one year as a separatist, I learned that although separatism is a very good way to learn about your difference and shape your identity, it does not empower you over time. Ultimately, you can become so isolated that you are disempowered.

It seems to me that everything we are talking about is a process. People have to understand difference, and it is good that women's studies makes them see that. Understanding that whenever you speak, you speak from who you are is basic. Nonetheless, each of us needs to try to incorporate as broad a range of understanding of other women's experiences as we possibly can. We used to have the notion of being a one-woman coalition: any woman who speaks ought to incorporate in herself as many parts of

women's experience as she has been able to understand, so that when she does have the space to speak, she can speak to issues that go beyond just her own experiences. This requires knowing the difference between solidarity speaking, coalition speaking, and claiming or co-opting others' lives.

I mention this in terms of students because, too often, they are not being informed about feminist practice and they are not being engaged in the relationship between theory and practice. There is good theory discussion, and there are some programs where students perform internships, but at my university these processes are totally separate. There may be some individuals who bring the two together, but there is no formal engagement. This reflects the separation that occurs out in the world. Clearly, there are some feminist women's studies programs where this is less true than others. But in general, it seems that these programs are far from the origins of women's studies, which was to use the academic arena to deepen our understanding of the problems women face and to encourage women to be activists. Maybe some women's studies programs do still see it that way, but I am not sure that the evolution of feminist theory has furthered these goals.

Theory and practice in universities

HH: Many women's studies professors feel their practice is their women's studies. They are challenging sexism on the campus; they fight sexual harassment; they work with the date rape awareness committee. They use a "my world is the campus" argument: "I as a professor am active on campus and in my professional association." I guess what I am saying, as we have all been saying, is that there is more separatism. In a sense, IWPR is part of that. We are saying, "We specialize in policy research. Since some of you are in academia and some of you are policy activists, we will be the bridge." But, then, that means I am not also working at the soup kitchen with homeless women or organizing strikes and mass demonstrations.

LW: That is why Bobbie's argument is curious to me. We are being too culturally relativistic if we act as if a welfare mother is going to have your skills to analyze data. If you did not do it, who would? "To speak about" is not "to speak for." To say what someone needs is not to say what someone wants. In the past, we could not work together because everybody was acting like their experience had been somebody else's experience. The very point of understanding difference is to enable us to work together.

EB: Of course one chooses a particular sphere in which to act. No one is saying that if you do policy research you should also go to the soup kitchen. But can you effectively work on sexual harassment on campus,

or date rape, or tenure, if you are not involved in the world at large? If you do not understand where it comes from? What it means about children's education? What it means about public policy? No, I do not see how. If you make visible the real lives of welfare women, if you help abolish some of the myths about welfare, you point to solutions. Please do that and feel good about that. That is helping make visible something that has been deliberately mystified.

HH: I was just trying to respond to this concern that one of the reasons feminist theory is not so useful is that the theorists or their students are not engaged in feminist practice . . .

CB: Well, I do not think it is just that they are not engaged in feminist practice. I agree with Ellen in that I do not expect everybody to do everything. We cannot. But not enough of the theory is being related to feminist practice. I have no problem with somebody making the university the place of feminist practice. In fact, I am in favor of activism in the university and of professors taking on sexism and other issues in that environment. But I do not see very much interaction between women's studies professors' theories and their practice. I would like some analysis of how the debates in theory connect to the struggles they are having within the university. One aspect of practice is to see the interrelationship between your struggle and someone else's struggle taking place in a different arena. Another is seeing your struggle as connected to your own theory. Maybe I am being too hard on what I see being done in the name of feminist theory because I know there is also good material being written. However, the way that I see theory being discussed in the university often seems to ignore the concrete struggles in the university as well as those of most women in the world.

What is feminist theory?

NH: Theory can be a really important piece of a movement—explaining to people what they are doing. Somebody should step back and ask what it means that we decided to organize things in this way. What vision of the world led us to this type of action? This form of organization?

HH: What do we mean when we speak of feminist theory? Do we just mean the part that is being written in a vocabulary the rest of us cannot follow? I think feminist theory should include work like that of Barbara Nelson and Linda Gordon, who write on the different streams of public benefits: the male stream, which tends to be better heeled, and the women's stream, which tends to be less well heeled. I do not read much of this minority feminist theory that we have been calling feminist theory.

CB: Who decides? Is [the quarterly] *Equal Means* feminist theory? Is

Ms.? Is the work on economic literacy done by women such as Mariama Williams feminist theory? For me all this is feminist theory, along with Patricia Williams's book, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* [1991]. I guess what we are doing is caricaturing a particular segment of feminist theory that some of us feel is too narrow in focus.

LW: But I would be interested in hearing whether that was considered feminist theory at your school. Patricia Williams's book yes, but, by and large, feminist theory has a more lofty definition to it at my university.

EB: Let us reclaim the definition if we can, in the same way that we are trying to redefine the women's movement or a women's coalition of coalitions—whatever we want to name it.

NH: I think that there is a structural question here. As feminists have become academics, "professional standards" have been imposed on us as to what counts as theory. For instance, the political science standards are not at all the ones that work for feminist theory, since political science is overall a very positivist discipline. In some ways, feminist theorists in the university have been victims of the literary establishment. Demographically, there are more women in humanities departments than anywhere else.

BSR: But regardless, many are politically active.

NH: The issue is not whether they are politically active. There are people in those departments who are very active. Rather, the issue is that there is a particular literary discourse, which has to do with texts and reading and writing, that somehow does not translate into experience and activism.

BSR: Certain disciplines feed people into certain activities and occupations. If you have theory coming out of English, you should not expect that theory to inform public social practice.

LW: I do not think that we necessarily know anything about you as an activist from your discipline.

HH: Most of us here are either public policy advocates or social scientists. I think it is true that we as public policy advocates look to social science rather than the humanities for our theory.

NH: I have always thought that feminist theory is a collective process. There has developed, within universities, a feminist theory community. Although individuals within the community are active in a variety of ways, their theories are often built upon a series of postmodernist, post-structuralist dogmas that in my view inhibit any kind of political activism. The theory itself is part of the problem. I think about not only feminist theorists but others who have contributed to postmodernist/poststructuralist arguments. These people are often active in social change organizations, but their theories do not provide intellectual support for their actions, or put differently, do not explain their practices to them.

LW: The argument could be made that at least one arena of feminist theory is actually more advanced than the practical movement: the emphasis on multiculturalism, about which we talked earlier. There is actually more attention to multiculturalism in the theory than you find in the world of practice.

BSR: In that way, the theory is good. It creates a standard set of values that many people do not live out, but against which they can measure themselves.

EB: I think that theory on multiculturalism was informed by difficulties in the practice. It was not in the abstract when people thought of it.

LW: But the academics and the theorists further developed it. I would argue that as a result of the theoretical work, multiculturalism gets much more attention in the real world than it did before.

NH: It seems that we have been saying that theory is useful when it is informed by and responds to feminist practices.

BSR: That is what *you* are saying. I think that there is in deconstruction the power of deconstructing the single narrative.

NH: I mentioned before that as feminists have entered universities, academic standards have been imposed on feminist theory. I think another aspect of this move into the academy is that the audience has shifted. I have the sense that now the audience for many feminist theorists in the academy (myself included) is other academics. Some of us have been saying that feminist theory is valuable to the extent that it is informed by and speaks to the practitioners; however, the academy is not built that way. At the same time, it is not feasible for each of us to go out and organize and then write theory in our spare time.

HH: So you would argue that feminist theory is valuable for practitioners insofar as it speaks to them.

NH: Speaks to them but also responds to problems that they have raised. Historically, that is what feminist theory did. Even your early work about Marxism and feminism was an effort to think through the question, Are we supposed to be part of the male Marxist movement? How do we do this?

HH: Right. We were women working in the New Left with male Marxist theory by which we felt dominated. One of the things that I was trying to do in the [1979] article "Unhappy Marriage" was to claim for feminism and the project of equality between women and men as much legitimacy as the Left and socialists gained from Marx's theory of class. Now that these perhaps "bastard Marxist societies," or rather state capitalist societies, have crumbled, the socialists are left in a weaker position, and overall the feminist position has gained legitimacy.

BSR: Of course, it is useful if theory responds to problems of practice, in the sense that it answers questions that people worry about and think

about and have to deal with. Nancy seems to feel that in the early days theory was practice oriented. When I think over the whole body of feminist theory, I do not have the same feeling. I do not think much theory ever responded to practice. I read works that did not have a particular effect on issues or organizations or things in which I was involved at the moment. The readings provided frames of references; they reinforced thoughts I was beginning to have and made me see things, make connections even when they didn't point out routes of practice.

LW: But what were these thoughts? Were these thoughts not relevant to your practice?

BSR: When I was sitting there at *off our backs*, doing layout, the theory probably did not help at all. I am just trying to say that not every theoretical article has to be immediately relevant for practice. Some can just tickle our minds.

HH: This is very interesting. When I worked for New Haven Women's Liberation, I did the newsletter. I think this is a very interesting aspect of the way intellectuals and academics contribute to movements. We wind up doing the newsletters.

BSR: Well someone has to do this stuff. Actually everyone on *off our backs* had to do layout.

LW: I think feminist theory should help us understand the world as well as inform practice. The theories should also be internally consistent in their logic. There has to be some ongoing relationship between theory and the real world, although the theory may not respond to practice itself.

EB: I agree.

LW: But, Bobbie, you were saying that you do not think theory needs to respond to practice.

CB: Works like Elizabeth Gould Davis's *The First Sex* [1971] and Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* [1976] were trying to understand the origins of patriarchy and where we had come from. For me these are very practical questions compared to what I see in some of the deconstructionist theory today. I do not want us to become too narrowly focused; that is why I appreciate what you are saying. However, there is something else that has gone on that is problematic: the phenomenon of professionals talking only to themselves.

BSR: But are you not applying a very narrow notion of theory? I just read this terrific book *Mothering* by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey [1994]. The book discusses how women of color, different groups of women of color, deviate from the ideology of mother. Would that not count as a theory book?

CB: Yes, it would. What I am realizing in this conversation is that, as Ellen suggested, I have let the deconstructionists define what is feminist theory, but there is plenty of work out there that should be claimed. At

the same time, much of the political analysis theory that does interact directly with practice is not visible and coherent. Women are doing it, but because it is not an academic discipline, it does not have a location. It happens here and there in different magazines or conversations. Maybe we need to reclaim ownership of that piece of theory—not as the only piece—but as a major piece that we want to strengthen.

EB: One of the reasons why what we claim as theory matters is that if we can enlarge the notion of what counts as theory then we reduce the power of those who monopolize the discourse. It is also important because I think some of the current theory has harmed feminism. This is one of the reasons why so many people say they are not feminists. Some of the work that gets characterized as feminist is held up to ridicule, yet it is all that we have to call theory.

**Has feminist theory or the women's movement
changed traditional ideologies?
The resurgence of the Right**

BSR: There is another question relating to feminist theory that I would like to discuss. Have we diminished the power of traditional signals and practices? For example, have we been able to broaden the family types considered in public policy?

CB: The main progress we have made is that concepts like the nuclear family are not taken for granted any longer. I do not think that our broader definitions have entered into public policy, but even contesting the concepts is a benefit. It is the first step. I think we can learn other ways to contest concepts from other countries.

HH: This election reminds us that we chose a life of constant struggle; now we can reestablish our pattern of hardly ever expecting to win. The election may represent a movement toward potential party realignment.

BSR: I agree it is a movement, but not one toward where we want to go. I do not know if you have felt the same way or not, Ellen, but, for the first time reading the newspapers, I felt like a Jew.

EB: Because of the Christian Coalition?

BSR: Everything is so Christian, but not ecumenical Christian.

LW: Well, fortunately or unfortunately, the Christian Coalition hates so many people.

CB: I know what you mean, because when I read about the coalition, I feel more lesbian, even though my recent work has not been primarily lesbian identified. I feel more hated. Whether you think of your sexual orientation or race or being Jewish as your primary identity, you feel the part of you that is visibly hated by the Christian Right.

EB: To me, the scariest part is how this mean-spiritedness is being sold

to people as the most simplistic cure for their problems. "If you feel bad, you want to get rid of that cancer, get rid of those immigrants." I feel like we need to begin a savvy media campaign, for example, on who immigrants really are, what their lives are like, and who gets hurt when you enact anti-immigrant policies. This mean-spiritedness must be examined.

LW: I mean this seriously. I am trying to warn people: take God back from the racists and sexists. I truly think that we have to make religion a contested ground.

HH: You know, it is interesting that the last two Democratic presidents have been Southern Baptist men, who, in a way, pushed their religion. And what do we have now but a resurgence of the religious Right? Why can they not keep it to themselves?

Is feminism global? Is sisterhood global?

HH: Charlotte, I am wondering about the world in which you are working. What do you think of the notion of global feminism, the idea that feminism is global, sisterhood is global? Is it like multiculturalism for many groups, an empty mantra? How has the growth of international feminism affected our theory and practice in the United States? Earlier, you said that, to some extent, feminist theory has not kept up with our needs in the international arena for a real understanding of how to work with difference, and yet you use absolutist standards such as human rights to help promote women's well-being. I am also wondering if you think groups in the United States are more internationally aware. We should all respond to this question.

CB: First of all, there is no question that feminism, the decentralized feminism we discussed earlier, has become a salient concept around the world. It is happening all over the place, in the sense that women, by whatever name they give it, are activists trying to figure out a whole series of gender-, women-, feminist-related questions. Women are taking leadership on the sociopolitical terrain of their lives. This is very exciting. This is what I mean when I speak about global feminism. This is not the same as global sisterhood, which is a question of solidarity among women.

The emergence of a global movement has affected practice in the United States somewhat. I do not know how deeply, and that is where I want to hear from other people. I feel that international feminism has energized movements in the United States. In the 1980s, when a lot of people in the United States were feeling very discouraged, global feminism energized our feminist practice because we saw women creating feminist practice in other situations that are equally, and sometimes even more, difficult. These women reminded us that even when you are up against very strong forces, you do not stop taking action.

There have also been increased efforts to connect international women's activism to local women's activism. I do not know whether this is true among those involved in theory. As someone working with global feminism and certainly dealing with the theoretical problems that we encounter, I realize that I have stopped reading most U.S. feminist theory, because it did not help me respond to anything I was dealing with in practice. Instead, I mostly read the magazines and newsletters that women produce, comparable to *Equal Means* in this country. I read the newsletters and short articles that women write out of their concrete struggles—my theory is built out of that material. I have always thought that theorists need to be reading at least some of the materials that are coming out of the daily practice. I know theorists are trying to incorporate a wider range of materials, but are they incorporating the materials in ways that take into account the experiences of practitioners operating in this wider field?

HH: One impression I have is that we are much more apt, both in practice and theory, to study problems faced by women in other countries, without focusing on why the United States is the leader in pushing these policies and what U.S. women can do to improve U.S. policy. For example, what problems are caused by International Monetary Fund [IMF] structural adjustment programs, and what is the role of the United States in implementing these policies?

BSR: Several years ago, women affiliated with the Center for Concern here in D.C. put out a paper showing the impact of structural adjustment on women.

HH: If we think welfare reform has not been picked up by many U.S. women's groups, we certainly do not have many U.S. women's groups picking up on what U.S. foreign policy should be on structural adjustment and how it affects women in Africa or Indonesia.

BSR: That is certainly true. The two communities do not yet speak much, although they have certainly been coming to a lot of meetings together. This past summer, in Barbados, I spoke with women experiencing the negative impact of structural adjustment resulting from U.S. and IMF policies. I have not yet fully made the connections between structural adjustment here and there.

LW: Theoretically, it seems that there is a real separation between those people who concentrate on domestic issues and those who work on international issues. Theory with an international focus has also emphasized understanding difference, while at the same time not making other nations' women seem exotic.

BSR: Feminist theory has done a lot in that area, the critique of the notion of the exotic and of women of the Third World as the exotic.

EB: I think there is another relevant issue, which is that people do not

understand the global economy that well. For instance, people need to understand that we will never stop the problem of plant closings until Mexico stops being a refuge for American companies. And Mexico will remain a refuge unless we support the labor organizing taking place in Mexico and restrict the U.S. companies that want to move there. It is economic self-interest that will connect people to the issue, not the inspirational aspect of solidarity. I know some women's groups tried to make these connections for NAFTA [North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement]. To go back to an idea we mentioned a bit earlier: we must understand the ways in which various issues intersect and the ways in which our own liberation depends on the liberation of different nations. Then we must ask ourselves what does this imply for our behavior and practice.

CB: The issue of the international economy is a good one because women in other countries have done creative work on structural adjustment policies and economic development. It could be interesting for women in this country to do comparable work. First, as Ellen said, we need more understanding that we live in a global economy and that until there is some kind of international response to that economy, workers are going to suffer. Another benefit is that we could learn from the strategies and ideas of women in other countries. For example, other women have made more use of the concept of human rights as an ethical basis for feminism than women in this country have. It has proven, for many women, to be the primary moral backing they use to counter cultural religious right language: "When the religious right says family values, we say human rights." What opposing concept has the same legitimacy as the religious family values concept? If they say family values and you say feminism, you are dead in the water. But when they say family values and you say, "We are defending women's human rights," you are on a different level of discourse. This is something we can learn from women in other countries.

HH: Charlotte, I seem to recall that you gave a paper and presentation on that six years ago at the first IWPR Annual Women's Policy Research Conference [see Bunch 1990].

CB: I did. It is interesting to see where the idea has evolved since then. This concept has been used primarily in the Third World, primarily Latin America and Asia, where they have found that connecting to human rights has strengthened their movement. It has been slower to catch on in the United States, Africa, and Europe. Since this is the issue I have been working on, it is the one that I would like to bring to attention more in the United States, but I also think that there are economic development strategies that women have pioneered in other countries and that we should look at here.

BSR: Like microenterprise?

CB: Exactly. But I think there is a larger problem in the economic world, which is that I do not think anybody knows what to do with the global economy.

HH: We have tried to use international precedent to strengthen our policy arguments. In our report on pay equity, we refer to the ILO [International Labour Organisation] Convention on equal pay for work of equal value and the fact that Canada and Great Britain have comparable worth systems. Similarly, when we study family leave, we find out about the models in other countries.

Nonetheless, I think that there are some basic concepts that we are not using, and there is plenty of room for learning. I am sure this is being done by the men, but maybe women should have a conference on what we can learn from people in other countries about combating religious fundamentalism. After the 1992 U.S. presidential election, I was overly optimistic: I thought, "Oh good, we've beaten the Right—they're in the decline." I heard on a news program that in just about every election in which the Christian Coalition weighed in, they won.

LW: The Christian Coalition brought people out to vote. However, in the cases of [Oliver] North and [Michael] Huffington, both conservatives who lost Senate elections, the Republican Party apparatus had reason to be at least marginally, if not actively, against the candidacies. The Christian Coalition does not constitute even 2.5 percent of the population, but they were generally successful. That is what we are up against.

BSR: You see the effectiveness of a movement where there is discipline and no diversity. We do not call them the Christian Movement.

EB: I do not think that is true. There are a lot of people who would call themselves Christians who are not in the coalition.

HH: The Christian Coalition is like Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. It is an organization consisting of a particular right-wing fundamentalist branch of Christianity, even if the coalition represents many different groups. That is what Bobbie was referring to.

CB: What is interesting is that there are differences amongst them, but they have done what we have not done lately, which is to find the kind of coalition language and goals and means to become an effective force in spite of their differences.

BSR: But we do not have God.

CB: Some of us are saying that we do have some concepts that should serve as a common ethics—a bottom line. I think that human rights is one of them. When we are viewed as being totally relativist ethically, we are not very compelling to people. The question is, Is there a way to express feminist values in language that is not totalizing, that is not denying diverse voices, but that actually puts forth a vision? If we do not have an ethical vision of feminism, we certainly will not have political power. We

need to be less afraid of putting forward some of these visions and talking about them. Further, we need to explore some of the concepts that women use internationally, like human rights, democratic civil society, and sustainable human development, to determine whether they can serve as unifying concepts in our domestic context.

Recommendations

HH: Because we are all such good practitioners, we are getting some recommendations out of our collective interview. This is certainly one: enlarge what counts as theory. Don't let one type of feminist theory constitute a monopoly, driving the rest of us away from theory. If we give up our theoretical base, we weaken ourselves. There is a moral certainty acquired from having a theoretical basis for your action that does give you strength as a political movement.

I was particularly struck by something that Charlotte said. Many of us in the United States have been working on various women's platforms—for instance, women's economic agendas—and I think that before we create agendas we need to define principles of feminism. So, second, we could develop a manifesto that incorporates some of the principles that women are using in other countries. That way, when Linda says, "Well, wait a minute, if you say feminism is not even about equality between men and women, then what the hell is it?" there is a statement of feminism that you can give to people and say, "This is what we stand for." I think people would find it very reassuring and comforting. It is an interesting intellectual project that theorists and activists could work on together.

BSR: Like Newt Gingrich's Contract [with America].

HH: No, his is the ten-point action platform. I think there is something underneath on which we might try to get agreement that would illuminate our situation and help us define ourselves differently from Phyllis Schlafly and anyone else who wants to claim they are a feminist.

NH: The beginning of the Feminist Federalist Papers?

HH: The Feminist Federalist Papers, right.

CB: It goes back to what *Quest* tried to do. Somebody needs to get activists to put their working assumptions about feminism on paper. We have talked about the problem in terms of academics and theorists, but it is also a problem on the part of activists. Most activists do not have the time, or do not take the time, to write. Our professional structures do not value our taking the time to write down our reflections on our actions. I wrote one major theoretical article on women's rights as human rights when the Center [for Women's Global Leadership] at Rutgers was

founded, but I have not had time to revise it because we are in the activism phase now, and there is no value given to taking time for theory. There must be some way to encourage doing theory by activists and making it one of the goals of our movements.

HH: That's our third recommendation then: create structural space for activists to write.

NH: It would be interesting to look at the structures that support writing. It is not only activists who lack support. As academics, what we produce is judged by other academics, and the last thing many academics want to think about is whether a theory is enlightening.

EB: I was talking to a friend of mine who is up for tenure. Many of the things she has written, including some research she did with 9to5, do not count.

CB: That is what happened to Nancy. Nothing she wrote in *Quest* counted at Johns Hopkins.

HH: That is why people now say not to help, for example, 9to5 until after you receive tenure.

CB: I think that needs to be said in *Signs* because this has to be a struggle of women in universities. It is not enough to say, "Do not write until after you get tenure," because if you wait until after you get tenured to become active, you will not have had the experience you need. We need to recognize the reality of the university world, but as more and more women receive tenure, they ought to be challenging and questioning some of these limiting structures.

LW: That has to be part of our activism. I sat on the African-American studies tenure committee for a very bright economist who had done most of her writing about women and blacks. We had one economist on the committee, and we had trouble getting him to consider any of her work. She had written for journals like *Signs*, which do not appear on his little list ranking economics journals. This woman had many publications and recommendations from international scholars saying she was top-notch, but it did not work out easily. If we expect people to write these articles, then we are also going to have to struggle to change the academy.

NH: I think it is really important to try to expand the list of journals that count, because I, too, have seen this happen in a number of tenure cases.

HH: Our fourth recommendation, then, is that academic feminists need to use their power in the academy to broaden the definition of writing that counts within universities, both for tenure and other decisions. In fact, I think we need to institutionalize a variety of structures to encourage the writing of feminist theory broadly defined. We need a system to provide places for activists to come and write. Even more, we need to

establish a standard practice, for instance, that every three years an activist is to take ten weeks off to reflect. This should become part of the culture of what it means to be a feminist activist.

Another structure could be an annual conference where activists and theorists talk about feminist theory and practice. IWPR has a regular conference (now biennial) attended by academics and practitioners, but we do not always address feminist theory. Our last conference focused on reinventing state and local government and women's stake in reform. One of the most popular sessions was "Feminist Theories of Bureaucracy." The conference was practice oriented, so I was surprised that this theory-based session was the most popular event. But I should not have been: many of the practitioners in the state governments are feminists. They want some theory to help them in their work. It is interesting that even at our conference, which we see as bridging the gap between academics and practitioners, we do not always discuss the connection between feminist theory and practice this explicitly—only at this session and the one Charlotte presented at in 1989.

CB: Can we also challenge journals like *Signs* to get activists writing in its pages?

NH: To get activists to write would probably require a full-time outreach editor who makes the contacts, tries to get the activists to write, transcribes the tapes when activists are interviewed. It would take resources and a commitment to make it happen. But maybe that is something to ask.

CB: It could be done without too great an expense if it were made a priority. I do not want to end with a condemnation of people for not doing more feminist theory. I think that the spirit of what we are saying is that the structures in both the academic and activist worlds do not help this connection of theory and practice to happen. We need to think about how to counter the low priority given this interaction and become involved in trying to create at least some institutional times when we challenge these "inhibiting" structures.

NH: One of the things we should recognize is that even while we create supportive structures, there are existing structures that are hostile to creating feminist theory. Nonetheless, maybe there are ways of pushing universities in directions that we have not tried before. One of the things that pops into my mind is the Hubert Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota.

HH: Were you thinking that it had a feminist policy component?

NH: No, I was thinking that it had a political action component.

LW: It probably does but under a different name. They used to do a series of forums that brought together scholars, journalists, and activists.

HH: I know that the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard does that too.

Their Institute of Politics brings together legislators, scholars, activists, and journalists. We do not have the women's version of that.

NH: So what I am describing is not unheard of within the university.

HH: Okay, so we have further recommendations, to IWPR to include more explicit discussions of feminist theories in our conferences, to journals like *Signs* to consider a staff position to encourage activists to write for it, and to universities to create more structures that support interaction between academics and nonacademics.

EB: Would it be useful to put these recommendations to a group like Women in Foundations?² We could think of a way to fund an initiative that encourages the development of women's theory and the relationship between theory and practice. For example, the funders could develop a retreat on theory and practice. It could be a conference where people are selected and given not only enough money to get there but also money to take the time to reflect on what they have learned about their work and on the help they need. Maybe we ought to take some of the recommendations in this discussion and send them to potential sponsors or funders.

NH: That is a really interesting idea.

BSR: One question we need to answer concerning feminist theory is the format in which this writing comes. This could be another whole discussion; in fact, it might be part of Ellen's retreat. I know at *off our backs*, we used to talk about (and I actually saw a version of) feminist theory in the format of a comic book or a soap opera. That might be considered too condescending, but it was very funny. What I am trying to say is that if you are going to write in *Equal Means* rather than writing in the *American Journal of Sociology*, you have only gone part of the way toward reaching a new audience. There is a further distance to go.

CB: It needs to be noted that *Equal Means* is no longer in existence. It was supported by the Ms. Foundation, but it cost too much to continue producing. Like *Quest* or many other feminist publications, it required institutional support to survive; subscriptions are not enough. The second point is that publications like *Equal Means* do have an expanded audience, but often even more people who might use them don't hear about them. Moreover, there is a very substantial group of people who do not have the publications they want because there is no journal that combines the accessibility and reflection on practice of *Equal Means* and the theory in *Signs*.

HH: Yes, and I think there are other formats, too. Progressives are using more videos and public service announcements, but I still feel that we have not focused as much on educating the public as have the right

² The name of the organization, Women in Foundations/Corporate Philanthropy, was changed to Women and Philanthropy in 1995.

wing and Christian Coalition. So, we want to recommend that we diversify the formats in which we produce and disseminate our feminist theories in order to strengthen our outreach to the general public. And we want to call all our recommendations to the attention of foundations and other funders.

LW: I also think that at some point we will have to tap into the progressive community at large to raise money. We get good things started, but there is no funding to sustain them.

HH: The right wing can do public education because they raise millions of dollars from corporations and the very rich. They have used this money to support right-wing student groups all over the country. This is a real structural constraint because their side has more money than our side does.

LW: I think that our side could be committed to give a bit more money than we do. There is no way that we could compete with the Right, but I do feel that we expect foundations and outsiders to pay rather than trying to raise money from ourselves and people like us. According to the Christian Coalition, their money comes in at fifteen dollars a pop. It would seem to me that we could also inspire people to give five or ten dollars.

HH: I think you are right. Our final recommendation: give money to the causes and organizations you believe in. And on that note, I think we should wrap up.

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