

Ambitious Moderation: Socialist Feminism in the NAM Years

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Judith Gardiner had already been active in the civil rights and feminist movements when she joined the New American Movement (NAM) in Chicago. She had become a member of the New University Conference and the Circle Women's Liberation Union, an affiliate of the national Women's Liberation movement, after she began teaching at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) in 1969. However, in NAM, Gardiner found an organization that was not only engaged in imagining what socialist-feminism could mean as a movement, but that also provided concrete means for articulating these politics in order to address practical community concerns. After the merger, she remained a member of DSA.

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Introduction

In an essay entitled "What is Socialist Feminism?" published in NAM's *Working Papers on Socialism & Feminism* in 1976, Barbara Ehrenreich said she wished to "cut through some of the mystery which has grown up around socialist feminism" in order to analyze the condition of the U.S. women's movement and so spur progressive action: "To understand the reality laid bare by these analyses is to move into action to change it." NAM was then at the mid-point of its eleven-year career from 1971 to 1982 and at a high point in public recognition and organizational success just as U.S. socialist feminism achieved its greatest prominence as a strand within the feminist movement.

The year preceding this publication, 1975, NAM and a number of socialist feminist women's unions had organized the National Conference on Socialist Feminism held in Yellow Springs, Ohio, with a reported attendance of about fifteen hundred.¹ While NAM's era was largely coextensive with that of U.S. second-wave feminism as a whole, NAM defined itself explicitly as a socialist feminist organization. Indeed, NAM was distinctive among mixed Left organiza-

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tions during the period in making women's liberation fundamental to its mission and distinctive within the Women's Liberation Movement in its commitment to democratic socialism.

NAM's ambitious goals included defining and pursuing a socialist feminism that was theoretically coherent, organizationally sound, and effective in moving progressive social action. Furthermore, NAM made the fundamental structural commitment to a fifty percent female leadership, thus developing women's confidence, experience, and skills and accustoming men to working with women leaders.² NAM socialist feminists were generally clear and united on the ultimate goal of a democratically socialist society and economy, but not always very specific on its contours or on the best ways to reach it. From today's perspective, many of NAM's early theoretical discussions sound utopian, although it also might be said that efforts to envisage a new and just society were among NAM's strengths. At the same time, actual NAM projects often worked via modest, practical, and reformist collaborations with liberal groups like labor unions and the National Organization for Women (NOW), sometimes influencing the groups' objectives in more progressive directions.

I write this essay about NAM's socialist feminism as a rank-and-file NAM member who was simultaneously active in women's and other organizations on the Left.³ My purpose is to give some of the flavor of the time with regard to the political alternatives we saw before us and to describe what socialist feminism meant in the organization's goals and projects. I argue that NAM took a leading role in creating democratic socialist feminism in the 1970s and in helping it maintain a distinctive identity, particularly after the breakup of the socialist feminist women's unions. In addition, one of NAM's most important interventions was in reshaping the feminist campaign for legal abortion into a much broader campaign for reproductive rights.

Socialist Feminist Practice at UIC

In those years—as at present—I taught at the University of Illinois at Chicago in the English department and in the Women's Studies Program, where during the 1970s I was also a member of the Program's Teaching Collective and of its governing Women's Studies Committee.⁴ Until it disbanded, I was also a member of the socialist feminist Chicago Women's Liberation Union, of which our small campus group, called Circle Women's Liberation Union, was an associated chapter dedicated to developing women's studies and increasing services for women on campus.

Like most NAM members in the early 1970s, I was young, white, heterosexual, and university educated, and, like many NAM women, I was then partnered with a male Left activist, although I was less usual in already having two young daughters.⁵ Like many NAM members then, I had been active for several years in the peace and civil rights movements. Coming to NAM after other New Left groups, I was seeking an alignment between the goals we professed and the means that might accomplish them as well as some clarifications of the goals themselves. Like many of my cohort, I came to feminism, and explicitly democratic socialist feminism, from within the Left and not from the autonomous women's movement.

To make sense of NAM's attractions for a prospective member in the early 1970s, I recall what then looked to me like the alternatives. I had visited the Soviet Union in 1968, which seemed dreary and authoritarian. A trip to China in 1976 impressed me more, but these examples of state socialism hardly seemed either likely models for the United States or attractive in themselves. Nevertheless, I was recruited as a potential member of the Communist Party U.S.A. Actually, I was invited along to one recruitment meeting aimed at my then husband, a leader in the progressive health movement. The seasoned, mostly elderly Communists who met us had organized unions and weathered the McCarthy era of persecutions. The meeting was supposed to be hush-hush, though the people present were all widely known as leftists. We were respectful of their considerable past accomplishments but not really interested. It was not that the Communists were too extreme for us. Quite the reverse. We thought of them as stodgy and set in their ways, better than liberals, of course, admirable in the Party's stands against imperialism and racism, but weak or wrong with regard to women's, gay, and cultural issues. Furthermore, we were turned off by their secrecy, their undemocratic methods of organizing, and what then seemed to be their paranoia about government surveillance.⁶ They taught important organizing lessons: know who will be at any meeting, be sure your people are there and well prepared, know what you want to get out of any event, have roles allocated in advance, and so on. Altogether, the Communists seemed preferable to the Trotskyist and Maoist Left sectarians like the Socialist Workers Party, who were alleged to infiltrate other groups, not to work in genuine coalition but to siphon off members for themselves. The International Socialists often presented acute analyses of political events, but they remained aloof from current politics. I have an old IS buddy who has not yet voted in a national election because she sees the two main United States parties as too—and virtually equally—imperialistic and corrupt. Other Left sects seemed even more impractical, narrow, and self-defeating.

One member of my campus New University Conference group in the early 1970s indulged in the period's adventurist rhodomontade: "it is difficult to analyze, much less forecast, when in history the objective and subjective conditions of life combine in such a way as to lead people to revolution," he wrote, recommending that "every NUC member should own a gun card and a piece" and develop paramilitary skills for the coming armed struggle (Connelly 3, 4). This rhetoric seemed preposterous and pretentious macho posturing. After all, we women NUC members were grading papers and leading student discussion groups, not leading armed guerillas in underground tunnels. So we broke away from NUC in order to establish ourselves on campus as the Circle Women's Liberation Union and as a part of the national Women's Liberation Movement. But while differentiating ourselves from the New and Old Left organizations of the time—and sometimes being attacked by them for inadequate theory—we retained their anti-capitalist analysis and an attachment to working with male allies. Both of these commitments distinguished us from radical separatist feminists, though we valued their insights into sexism and joined some autonomous women's groups. Because we

taught at a state university, our classes were open to all students, though our organizing group was all women. Nor did we see patriarchy as the fundamental oppression, as radical feminists did. Theories of what is now called intersectionality, on the interdependence of hierarchies of oppression based on gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and social class, were fundamental to our democratic socialist feminism. We also defined ourselves against hippie, free love, drug culture, and other countercultural movements that focused on sexual liberation and lifestyle changes without clear connections to economic transformation.

However, most crucial to our self-identification as socialist feminists was distinguishing our beliefs from those of liberal feminism, which we accused of short-sightedness when it treated women as a uniform group and when it framed issues only from a white middle-class perspective. For example, the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion was a great victory for the Women's Liberation Movement, but we also believed that reproductive rights must include access for women of all regions and economic backgrounds to family planning, abortion, and other reproductive services and free them from the sterilization abuse often committed against women of color. Furthermore, NAM's socialist feminism argued in favor of women's rights to be mothers, rights that could only be actualized with access to adequate health care and financial resources.⁷ Yet actual NAM actions on this issue were often planned with liberal and radical feminist groups, like rallies for reproductive rights and for public hospital abortion access. Furthermore, despite generalizations about the national organization, Chicago NOW had actually been founded by, among others, African American and white women labor organizers and was far from elitist in its programs.⁸

Thus, in terms of my feelings at the time regarding what it meant to be a socialist feminist, I saw NAM as advancing a program toward a more just and fulfilling society for all people in terms of gender and other social variables, and as proceeding through plausible interim goals. That is, NAM provided utopian visions toward a future horizon but also willingly collaborated on interim steps. The title of Zillah Eisenstein's 1981 book captures this well: *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* claimed that to fully implement even liberal goals for an egalitarian society would show the necessity for and so help create radical changes in the economic and gender orders. I therefore conceptualized democratic socialist feminism as rational and reasonable, positioned between Left and feminist extremists, on the one hand, and, on the other, liberals who were too complacent about the capitalist status quo. Talks with colleagues from this period confirm the attractions of NAM's moderation. For example, Jo Patton gratefully recalls the absence of "wing-nuts" like those who disturbed the 1975 conference and the Chicago Women's Liberation Union with endless attacks on other women's racism, elitism, and "failure to be revolutionary enough" (Patton).

From today's vantage point over thirty years later, we may regard the early 1970s with nostalgia as the period of the nation's highest average working wage and as a time when broad acceptance of the goals of the women's liberation movement seemed to be signaled by

the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion rights. At the time, however, the war in Vietnam had not yet been ended, and the Left, as always, felt and was under attack. There was a backlash against feminism as soon as it had accomplished enough to be resented, and conservative forces mobilized to cut back feminism's gains. Furthermore, dissension and fission continued among many Left groups, whose views were little heeded in society at large, especially after United States armed forces withdrew from Vietnam.

For those of us in Circle Women's Liberation, the 1970s were a busy and a heady era. We sought to understand, to help create, to embody, and to teach the tenets of socialist feminism. We were eager to read new analyses like the statements of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union on socialist feminism, a term adopted in Chicago in 1972, but we weren't attracted to the hairsplitting ideological discussions appreciated by some Left academics (Hyde Park). Instead, we defined our socialist feminism in the beliefs that women were an oppressed but internally divided social group and that patriarchal oppression could not be understood—and should not be worked against—and could not be redressed—without an anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-homophobic, and anti-classist as well as feminist analysis.

My examples of how we attempted to carry out a socialist feminist agenda at UIC in the early 1970s are chiefly from two projects, our founding of a Women's Studies Program and our campaign to establish a campus childcare center. Although some of us were NAM members, these were not official NAM projects but rather collaborations with other socialist feminist organizations in Chicago with comparable politics and goals – chiefly the Chicago Women's Liberation Union and Action Committee for Decent Childcare (ACDC).

To illustrate how we thought we were advancing a socialist feminist agenda in our courses, I refer to my notes for class sessions from a 1973 panel in our introductory Women's Studies 101 course, "The American Woman Today," on the family. Panels of speakers discussed the family as an institution, not as an inevitable or natural formation, with a focus on how the nuclear family developed its functions and ideology under capitalism. We spoke of the outmoded but still influential Victorian ideal of the happy home insulated from the world, presided over by the wife and mother, with middle-class dad at work to bring home the prosperous bacon, happy little kiddies playing with their gender-typed guns and dolls, and often with working-class servants hovering just outside the Christmas card picture. We spoke of women's isolation in the nuclear household with reference to the middle-class housewife's loss of status and useful work in comparison to pre-industrial farming households. We also discussed alternatives to marriage, including communes, which were described by teaching collective members who lived in a mixed-sex, Marxist-leaning city commune. Other class sessions described gay and straight, individual and collective alternatives to marriage as well as alternatives to traditional motherhood like single motherhood, egalitarian childrearing, Israeli kibbutzim and other collectives, and the choice not to have biological children of one's own (Gardiner, "Family").

Besides trying to integrate a socialist feminist perspective into our course content, we also tried to institute what we considered so-

cialist feminist practices in the university, most obviously in the practice of teaching collectively, with students as well as faculty and staff involved in planning courses, leading discussions, lecturing, and selecting guest speakers.⁹ We also established the practice of meeting with university administrators collectively—or at least in groups of two or three—rather than having the chair of women’s studies be the sole negotiator for the program.

In discussions of the contemporary family, the need for childcare was a favored theme, whether for one’s own children or as a social obligation. It was therefore synergistic that in addition to founding the Women’s Studies Program, another example of an action project in the early 1970s that we thought would advance socialist feminist goals was our campaign to establish a childcare center on campus. The campaigners included some women’s studies faculty, of whom I was one, as well as other UIC students, faculty, and staff. Childcare seemed a perfect socialist feminist project because it connected the needs of women and children, the workplace and changing family structures, and women in differing class positions and because it provided an opportunity for outreach to the entire campus community. The possibilities for modeling social change also seemed exciting: men could be childcare workers, changing traditional assumptions about gender, and the center’s toys and activities could model collective, cooperative, and nonsexist behavior.

We began a campaign for “free, client-controlled full-time daycare on campus adequate for all the students and staff who need it” with a petition that claimed child care was necessary for “young parents trying to finish their educations and for many on-campus workers” (Childcare campaign). My notes include our agenda for moving the childcare project forward, and the campus group collaborated with the Action Committee for Decent Childcare. Whereas ACDC principally lobbied the Chicago city council for changes in childcare licensing provisions, our group sought the direct provision of a childcare center for the campus community.¹⁰ Our strategy, informed by prior New Left struggles, included writing position papers and leaflets outlining the justice and necessity of childcare on campus, followed by posters and other publicity as well as numerous organizational meetings. We surveyed students and staff to indicate a need for the services, circulated a petition for university support, and staffed booths in the student center to talk about the project and gain signatures for the petition. We researched appropriate spaces on campus and childcare provisions in other universities. We wrote articles and sought publicity. We presented our proposals and petitions to the university administration. A sister student organization, a parents’ cooperative for shared babysitting, held a baby-in in the administration building, where for a few hours romping and squalling children demonstrated the need for safe and separate spaces while their parents were in class. Acting as the moderate wing of the campaign, our group negotiated with campus administration for space and financial support so that parent fees could be kept low.

The result was the Circle Children’s Center, which opened in 1972 and is still operating. It began in an old factory leased by the university. We cleaned it up ourselves, collected toys, and hired and

paid the first staff member. Although we'd sought free childcare, we actually achieved a sliding fee structure where the parents supported the staff salaries, and the university provided the space without a rental fee and remodeled the space for children, including child-sized bathrooms. Since then, the Center has expanded and been accredited. It is better staffed and housed in better quarters, thus fulfilling the original practical objectives. The Center was never cost-free for its users and is now a liberal institution well-integrated into the university. The current director affirms, "we implement an anti-bias curriculum in an environment where children are free to explore gender, ethnicity and different-abledness. We carefully choose our curriculum activities, materials, books, etc. The best thing about the Children's Center continues to be the diversity, and families are invited to share aspects of their culture and family life with children and staff" (Fineberg).¹¹

NAM's Socialist Feminist Agenda

Thus in the early 1970s, our group at UIC was building successful campus programs that we considered congruent with democratic socialist feminist goals, in alliance with women's and anti-imperialist movements and organizations. NAM was distinctive among mixed New Left organizations then in defining itself as socialist feminist and in making this viewpoint central to its analyses and to its organizational structures. The heyday of socialist feminism was coextensive with NAM's, but when the socialist feminist women's unions began unraveling in the mid-1970s, NAM played an important role as the flagship national socialist feminist organization (Gardiner, "What Happened"). Our course goals and daycare project indicate what we in the UIC Women's Studies Program thought socialist feminism was in the NAM years and how we attempted to put it into practice. Furthermore, our campus collective was connected with NAM not only by a common socialist feminist ideology but also by a number of key individuals. Holly Graff, a member of the UIC teaching collective for several years when she was a graduate student in philosophy, later moved into national leadership of NAM, and Peg Strobel, the Director of Women's Studies at UIC from 1979 into the 1990's, was a NAM activist whose politics were a positive point in her recruitment by members of our Program.¹² A survey of national NAM documents from the mid- to late 1970s indicates similar theoretical investments but a much broader range of action projects. Furthermore, NAM's structure and programs reflected its socialist feminist commitments, not only in the strength of women's leadership but also in the chapter discussion groups and publications where men as well as women debated socialist feminist precepts and programs. These documents illustrate the broader aspects of NAM's socialist feminism.

NAM's 1975 "One Year Plan" begins in a very modest, non-theoretical way: "Our organizing will include a focus on organizing women around issues that are of particular concern to them." It goes on to encourage participation in "mass women's organizations" and "local autonomous women's formations." It emphasizes the desire

to build and participate in a communications network emerging from the Yellow Springs, Ohio, socialist feminist conference of July, 1975, and to work on joint programs with feminist groups ("Collected NAM Resolutions" 1). Resolutions over the next five years kept this strategy while adding a number of direct action projects. NAM's 1976 "One Year Plan" urged individuals and chapters to "challenge all manifestations of racism and sexism" in coalition work and to support "autonomous formations of women and Third World people" in order to "build a genuinely revolutionary force." "Health workers and clerical workers" were to be targeted. This plan's two main projects were clerical organizing, which would "challenge sexism as well as organizing women as part of the working class," while supporting "the struggle of gay people for democratic rights" and analyzing the "social causes" of "violence against women." Chapters were urged to develop the women's movement in their areas, "keeping in mind the two tasks of further clarifying and developing socialist-feminist theory and of broadening the outreach of the women's movement in the working class." Such activities would help activists "confront the serious contradictions raised, such as the relationship between racism and sexism and the stance of socialists toward the judicial system" ("Collected NAM Resolutions" 1-2).

Specific plans of the period—to cooperate with others in local action projects but also to lead the Left in analysis—were followed by an ambitious statement: "NAM recognizes its national responsibility to further develop and help give leadership to the socialist-feminist movement" ("Collected NAM Resolutions" 2). The NAM Socialist Feminist Caucus claimed that because "s-f is not a unified theory or strategy," as shown by dissension at the Yellow Spring conference, it had taken the responsibility of drafting "some unifying principles to facilitate debate."¹³ These included applying a socialist feminist approach to "all of our practice, not just women's issues"; linking "workplace and community struggles" to overcome the sexual division of production and the family; organizing women "around their oppression and needs as women," building feminist, anti-racist and class consciousness together; analyzing "the potentials of various parts of the women's movement"; ending discrimination against homosexuality; urging on men the responsibilities to "actively combat sexism among men" and to "support women in organizing women"; and working jointly "with autonomous s-f groups in organizing women" (Sandberg 79).¹⁴ Outside NAM the relationship between racism and sexism was of considerable theoretical and practical interest, with the most memorable and widely circulated socialist feminist statement by women of color being that of the Combahee River Collective in 1977 (Combahee).

The pivotal years of 1975-77 simultaneously express a need to develop socialist feminist theory and practice, as though it is a movement just in its beginnings, and to protect it from a backlash already in place. Thus the NAM Socialist Feminist Caucus in 1975 already claims "that s-f is threatened on some fronts, partly from political tendencies antagonistic to feminism and partly from lack of real activity around s-f" (Sandberg 79). On the other hand, the time is still seen as one of considerable opportunity for the Left. So the NAM

"One Year Plan" 1976-77 claims that in "the last year there has been a continued weakening of capitalist hegemony in the world" ("New American Movement: One Year Plan" 1). We were hopeful at this period, and practical and institutional gains continued, even as major transformations remained elusive.

NAM's socialist feminist resolutions for 1977 continued the organizational priorities of clerical organizing and anti-violence work, which were to be accomplished through "united front projects," a potentially vanguardist feminist strategy that recalls the Old Left, where a cadre of communists might secretly infiltrate a mass group to sway its policies. NAM members, however, usually declared their goals and allegiances more openly. In addition, efforts to fight the U.S. conservative backlash included defenses against attacks on the ERA and on abortion and gay rights: "these rights are not only democratic demands but challenge the bases of sexism" (New American Movement, "One Year Plan" n.p.). The NAM Socialist Feminist Commission was charged with analyzing welfare rights and "the situation of minority women." A 1977 resolution claimed abortion rights as "our minimum demand at this moment" heading toward a long-term "struggle for the totality of conditions for free choices concerning child-bearing." Thus NAM adopted the language of "choice," used by NOW and other liberal feminist groups, though with the explanation that NAM's position also involved "a critique of capitalism and its limiting effects on family planning." NAM saw this focus on reproductive rights as valuable in itself but also as a means for organizing a larger constituency for the Left: "A pro-choice position has the potential, and is necessary, to develop a broad coalition of women, health workers, poor peoples' organizations and trade unionists." Furthermore, "goals for a pro-choice movement" included developing "a nation-wide coalition" that reached "non-white forces working on abortion sterilization." Nationally, immediate steps included a "nation-wide newsletter" on abortion struggles and writing resolutions and pamphlets for unions and local NAM chapters ("Collected" 3-4).

The next few years kept up this momentum around socialist feminist issues and approaches in national NAM and its chapter projects. In Chicago, after the breakup of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, its Blazing Star chapter, dedicated to lesbian activism, voted as a group to join NAM. Elaine Wessel commented that there was already a significant overlap in membership between NAM and independent socialist feminist women's organizations, and the women of Blazing Star felt that "men in NAM seemed interested in and respectful of feminism" (Wessel). According to Chris Riddiough, another Blazing Star member, NAM was "the left organization that seemed to have the greatest commitment to feminism" and to LGBT issues with a "focus on how theory and practice fit together." She felt that NAM's support for LGBT issues was greater than that of other socialist organizations at the time, and she wrote for and distributed NAM newsletters in the lesbian community. She was also active in the Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Metropolitan Chicago in these years, working especially on state legislation for gay and lesbian rights. She recalls this period

as the “peak” of left/ feminist cooperation, which has decreased since. Then, she believes, socialist feminists had an impact on the political thinking of a broader group, including legislators— “not as much as we’d like, but still more than now.” In comparison, she says from her current position in Washington, D.C., “the last twenty to thirty years have seen a tendency to ghettoize” LGBT issues, so, for example, many gay lobbyists now “see no connection between environmental and civil rights, but NAM pulled the pieces together in a way not seen much since” (Riddiough).

In 1978, NAM reaffirmed that as a socialist feminist organization “the quality of our political process is of paramount importance.” Therefore, all chapters were urged to “do a careful and serious evaluation of their feminist practice in all areas” (“Collected” 5). That year the convention resolved to connect NAM’s activities on reproductive rights and labor beyond clerical organizing, in particular through advocacy for safe workplaces, anti-nuclear organizing, gaining feminist and gay and lesbian support for the Coors strike, fostering positive attitudes to gay and lesbian workers in the workplace, increasing women’s participation in unions, and fighting sexual harassment.¹⁵ While its actions stayed largely the same, the socialist feminist resolutions for the 1980 convention emphasized changes in the social contexts of the past several years. They declared that feminist and lesbian and gay liberation had “made real but limited advances” while the “disintegration of the nuclear family in the U.S.” had increased women’s “isolation and personal misery.” Although socialist feminists, like radical feminists, critiqued the failings of the nuclear family as the sole family form, they saw its disintegration, especially in the absence of safety nets and alternative social networks, as harmful to children and to individuals left stranded by divorce or separation.¹⁶ Outside the United States, feminism was seen as advancing, but “third world women bear much of the brunt of United States’ corporate expansion.” A NAM “school” on socialist feminism was suggested as an educational forum. Once again NAM proclaimed that “it is time to develop a more thorough socialist feminist analysis of women’s oppression and to develop a national strategy based on that analysis” (“Collected” 7). Thus action projects, often collaborative with other groups, continued along with efforts to develop socialist feminist theory.

Some examples of that theory were published in NAM publications like “Working Papers on Socialism and Feminism.” As we have seen, Barbara Ehrenreich, a pioneer theorist of socialist feminism and a NAM leader, still felt it necessary in 1976 to defend the idea that socialism and feminism had anything to do with one another. She explained that socialist feminism as unarticulated concept has “been around for a long time.” If one is “a woman in a capitalist society,” she wrote, “you get pissed off: about the job, about the bills, about your husband (or ex), about the kids’ school, the housework, being pretty, not being pretty, being looked at, not being looked at (and either way, not listened to), etc.,” and then think about what needs change – and become committed to helping make those changes. Thus she defines Marxism and feminism as requiring action: her “synthesis” of the two includes the “mutual isolation and

collective dependence" of the working class on the capitalist class and names the "privatized family" and especially women as the "prime targets of pacification/feminization." The solution she recommends is to "build collectivity and collective confidence among women" as a way of building class consciousness and to "build the social and cultural autonomy of the working class" as a necessary advance in "women's liberation" (Ehrenreich).¹⁷

Another essay in the same publication took on connections between economics and sex. In "Illusions of Love and Power," Elayne Rapping claimed that the sexual revolution was only "for the upper classes" who might also indulge in such practices as "open marriage, bisexual chic, and sadomasochism," while everyone else was instead offered pornography: "I think it [sex] can be an incredibly rewarding form of communication, sharing, and intimacy—not to mention, a lot of fun," she wrote, but pornography seemed to her politically dangerous, especially because it showed lonely, insecure men that "the way to relate to people is to dominate them, use them, treat them as objects or slaves" (Rapping 16). So, just as radical feminists claimed, pornography led to violence against women and misogyny, but Rapping also argued that one of pornography's purposes was to divert people from real economic and political problems and solutions. Thus, she affirmed the Left viewpoint that U.S. popular culture was intended to pacify the working class against perceiving its real enemies. "Lord knows there's a lot for the average American male to feel angry and violent about. And isn't it just convenient" for "Wall Street and Capitol Hill" that this anger should be directed against families and lovers, not against the business interests bringing about "the brutalization and destruction of the rest of the world."

Roberta Lynch's essay in the same volume worried "Is the Women's Movement in Trouble."¹⁸ That is, while socialist feminist theory continued to develop, the women's liberation movement of the past decade had already met significant setbacks from a conservative backlash. Lynch confirmed that "there is painful strife within the movement" but claimed that such advances and defeats were part of all liberation struggles, and that progress continued in the "hundreds of small projects (health centers, rape counseling, etc.) around the country." She cited success in persuading NOW members to a broader approach as a NAM achievement, and she called for "ongoing organizational forms" to help sustain the women's movement, although she concluded that women's "expectations and consciousnesses" had been raised to a level that could not be pushed back (Lynch).

The antifeminist backlash was much on NAM members' minds in the mid-1970s. Judy MacLean wrote in *New American Movement News*, about "The Anti-Feminist Movement," that women were still its "pawns" and victims. Despite many local victories, MacLean wrote, despondency was created by the frustration of the women's movement being unable to move passage of the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and the success of anti-abortion tactics. MacLean's explanation for the success of anti-feminist politics included the influence of the Catholic church, the view that insurance companies don't want ERA because they profit from

inequality, and the antagonisms of housewives who realize that “there just aren’t enough jobs out there that pay enough for economic independence to be a real alternative,” hence their clinging to the familiar housewife role. Feminism is represented to these women as liberal feminism, and socialist feminism hadn’t yet “become a real enough force to engage the very women to whom we need to reach out most,” she felt (MacLean 6-7). The solution, then, was to continue to work in coalitions with other groups.

By the end of the 1970s, the NAM Socialist Feminist Commission lists a large number of activities and discussions, expanding from its consistent emphases of the past several years on clerical organizing, violence against women, reproductive rights, gay and lesbian parenting, and feminist theory (NAM Socialist Feminist Commission). Considerable emphasis continued to be placed on preparing educational materials like study guides about such topics as sexual harassment, non-sexist education, and childcare in order to “reach many mainstream women.” NAM members were encouraged to join NOW and discuss the results in NAM publications. Additional ideas for chapters included parenting networks and reproductive rights task forces (CWLU Herstory Editorial Committee; also see Hyde Park Chapter).

Peg Strobel wrote on NAM’s behalf of the success of Women’s Studies, if not specifically socialist feminist women’s studies, in the U.S. academy. Although the field had grown from “a scattering of courses taught by committed feminists to an impressive array of courses, literature and personnel,” she foresaw “difficulties ahead,” from conflicts over collective structures and hierarchical institutions to funding issues and the promotion struggles of activist faculty. Even in its successes, Strobel feared that Women’s Studies risked “relieving the rest of the university of its responsibility to discuss women intellectually” and so ghettoizing its accomplishments rather than helping transform all of U.S. society (Strobel, “Women’s Studies” 29-30).

An example of our understanding of socialist feminist theory at UIC at the end of the decade was evident in the panel our Women’s Studies Program presented at the 1980 National Women’s Studies Association annual convention in Bloomington, Indiana, entitled “Socialist Feminist Theory and the Women’s Studies Curriculum” (Gardiner, “Socialist Feminist Theory”). Here, our effort was to introduce socialist feminism to an audience more attuned to other feminist formations and to argue for its benefits, and our ideas were congruent with those NAM had been promulgating for years. As we often did in classes, we disparaged liberal feminism with the familiar metaphor of its willingness to eat a slightly bigger portion of the “same pie” of American culture rather than baking a better one. To such limited liberalism we contrasted orthodox socialism, with what we claimed was its one-dimensional emphasis on paid employment and the division of labor, and we criticized the sexism and heterosexism in the so-called “socialist states” of China, Cuba, and Russia. Comparing our views with other feminisms, we claimed that socialist feminism “attempted to be comprehensive and precise regarding both the universal oppression of women and the differences among

women," who were divided by the intersecting categories of race, class, culture, sexuality, and political history, and we emphasized our commitment to collective action, broad participation, and democratic process on the path to a genuinely new, gender just society.

After discussing definitions of socialist feminism, we addressed "Problems and Polemics." Among the problems were marginalization and mystifications, while the responses we championed included an acknowledgment of differences between women, a topic that became increasingly important throughout the 1980s with the influences of theories by women of color and post-structuralists. By the problem of marginalization, we referred not just to women within society as a whole but more specifically to the separation of socialist feminists from the rest of the women's movement, to "mainstreaming" that kept liberal views dominant, and to divide-and-conquer strategies that isolated socialist feminists. The problems of mystification that we emphasized were primarily attacks on socialism, not on feminism, attitudes that claimed socialists are all cranks, its terms are full of jargon, and the contradictory disclaimers that socialism when tried didn't work and that its battles had already been won. We also decried the belief in individual solutions to social problems and rejected negative characterizations of collectivity as invariably ineffective, conformist, and just uncool.

For this academic audience, we discussed differences among women as including the differences between teachers, students, and staff as well as those based on race, social class, and sexual orientation. Such differences would not disappear, we said, by the simple rhetoric of "sisterhood." Rather, these real differences would need to be acknowledged and understood in order to be overcome, while allied actions toward common goals would benefit all oppressed groups, not just women. One advantage of socialist feminist theory over other feminist theories, we claimed, was that it understood feminist questions in their full social contexts, using concepts like alienation adapted from Marxism and from mainstream feminism such as analytic approaches as that arising from the insight that "the personal is political." We claimed that socialist feminist commitment to practice included an ability to trace the widest implications of proposed solutions to women's problems. Our example of socialist feminism illuminating a universal issue better than other theories was the analysis of motherhood, in which we referred to Nancy Chodorow's early cross-cultural work on mothering, with its comparisons between U.S. middle-class and English working-class practices of child rearing, as well as her much better known psychoanalytic theories (Chodorow, "Family"; *Reproduction*). We concluded our panel by describing practices of motherhood that defied the middle-class American institution of privatized motherhood, particularly lesbian mothers' custody battles and the Chicago Maternity Center's home-based, low-cost, and low risk alternative to most women's hospital-controlled experiences of childbirth (Gardiner, "Chicago Maternity Center").

Conclusions

There is a tendency for some of those involved in Left Movements of the 1970s to idealize those years as a halcyon period of accomplishments later overturned by reaction and loss. It certainly seemed a more hopeful period in terms of our expectations for social change, and I look back on these years as an inspiration for the energy needed for progressive activism now. However, activists in the 1970s, too, experienced blowback, frustration, and despair over the great odds against dramatic transformation in the social order. At the same time, NAM always expressed large ambitions for changing the mind and practices of the country. With regard to socialist feminism, it played an important institutional role, especially in developing women's leadership within mixed Left organizations and in transforming the discourses on reproductive rights. Despite some efforts at more complex theoretical elaboration, the basic tenets of socialist feminism—that is, the interdependence of economic and cultural factors in shaping women's opportunities and in maintaining the gender order—remained throughout the period and made their way into taxonomies and textbooks about feminism. The term is still being used. For example, Rosemary Tong's 2009 edition of her textbook *Feminist Thought* explains the theory's genesis as the effort "to explain the complex ways in which capitalism and patriarchy allied to oppress women," particularly through "interactive-system explanations" that "stress the interdependency of capitalism and patriarchy" (Tong 111, 115).¹⁹ She emphasizes the underpayment of women's work as a global phenomenon, and she cites Nancy Holmstrom's claim that "Socialist Feminism is the approach with the greatest capacity to illuminate the exploitation and oppression of most of the women of the world" (Holmstrom cited in Tong 120). Tong connects earlier socialist feminist views with postmillennial anti-imperialist and global feminism. She summarizes that "[t]he relevance of contemporary socialist feminism's overall message for women cannot be overstated" (Tong 118-19).

Thus I chart NAM's achievements in terms of its coordination and voice for both ultimate socialist feminist goals and campaigns for interim improvements that might reasonably be realized. NAM's framing of issues always acknowledged economic factors without making them the determining structure against which everything else was superstructure, and it acknowledged hierarchies of race as well as of class and gender in its analyses. In particular, the advantage of campaigns like those focused around reproductive rights, childcare, and women's wages were that the goals were obvious to large segments of the population, and, if won, would bring material benefits to many people, while the campaigns themselves would illuminate systems of oppression and structures of power that might make those involved more amenable to democratic socialist transformations of the social order as a whole. In comparison with other groups on the Left, NAM remained moderate, joining in coalitions with liberal groups and never sponsoring adventurist actions. It also remained relatively free of the major splits and divisions that plagued other groups. It is for this reason that I've called NAM's policies ones of ambitious mod-

eration, in particular by helping create and championing socialist feminist theory and action programs through the 1970s and, via its successor organization Democratic Socialists of America, up to the present.²⁰

Notes

¹ The planning committee for the Socialist Feminist conference in Yellow Springs included representatives from Berkeley/Oakland Women's Union, Boston Area Socialist Feminist Organization, Chicago Women's Liberation Union, Lexington Socialist Feminist Union, New American Movement Women's Caucus (represented by the C.P. Gilman Chapter of Durham, NC, and the Dayton Socialist Feminist Group), New York City Women's Union, Radical Women (Seattle), Twin Cities Women's Union (Minneapolis/St. Paul), and Valley Women's Union (Northampton, MA). "Announcement." Also see the Conference "Report."

² As Holly Graff attests was true of her own experience, a commitment that for her sharply differentiated NAM from her earlier New Left experiences (Graff).

³ Thanks to Victor Cohen for organizing the panel "Three Case Studies in Disciplinary History: Socialist-Feminism, Rhetoric, and Cultural Studies," Cultural Studies in America Conference, Portland, OR, 2007, for discussions on NAM, and for this collection.

⁴ Our university was originally known as the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, and our Women's Studies Program changed its name to the Gender and Women's Studies Program in 1999.

⁵ Bill Barclay estimated in 1980 that 80% of NAM's members were between 18 and 35 years old (*Socialist Feminist Commission Report* 15). I thank Bill Barclay and Peg Strobel for giving me access to their collection of NAM documents. NAM members were predominantly white and heterosexual, with some gay and lesbian members and a small number of people of color.

⁶ Current accounts do document FBI surveillance of the women's movement as well as of the Old Left. See Salper, Rosen. Chicago "Red Squad" records of Chicago police surveillance of the CWLU are held at the Chicago History Museum.

⁷ Thanks to Peg Strobel and Holly Graff for emphasizing this point. NAM was a party to R2N2, the Reproductive Rights National Network, a coalition of groups opposing the Hyde Amendment of 1976, which prohibited the use of federal funds for abortions except when a woman's life was endangered.

⁸ Based on oral testimony from participants in the conference, "Documenting the Women's Movement in Chicago, 1960-1980," Chicago Area Women's History Council, held at the Chicago History Museum, March 16, 2008.

⁹ Thanks to Peg Strobel for discussion about this history as well as documentation. On collectivity in our program see Strobel "Consciousness" and "Academy" and Gardiner "Rethinking."

¹⁰ We planned presentations to groups on campus, including students and staff unions. My notes don't record with whom we actually met.

¹¹ The facility's current name is UIC Children's Center. Nancy Fineberg, Director, commented on current staff diversity, including a male teacher, and on hopes for eventual expansion to include infant care (Fineberg).

¹² Holly's mentor at UIC was Sandra Bartky, a pioneering socialist feminist philosopher, who was also a member of the Women's Studies teaching collective (Graff). I also thank former NAM member and Women's Studies activist Alice Stevens for her reminiscences about this period.

¹³ For a discussion of the meaning and results of this conference, see Ezekiel.

¹⁴ Also see Rapping and MacLean.

¹⁵ Despite these goals, not all members were convinced of NAM's commitment to GLBT and feminist issues. Valerie Traub, then a California student who identified as "less of a Marxist" than many NAM members, reports that she thought that "NAM's commitment to socialist feminism was more strategic than heart-felt" (Traub). There may have been considerable local variation; for example, the incorporation of the Blazing Star chapter of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union into Chicago NAM encouraged NAM to join city-wide LGBT activities (Wessel).

¹⁶ Thanks to Peg Strobel for emphasizing this point.

¹⁷ I've corrected obvious typographical errors in the text.

¹⁸ No question mark appears in the title.

¹⁹ Tong's textbook simplifies concepts for classroom use, but her descriptions are similar to those in other texts as well, including Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg's *Feminist Frameworks*. Jaggar, a feminist philosopher, was also a NAM member, as was feminist philosopher Iris Young.

²⁰ DSA is a feminist organization, but features this aspect less prominently than NAM did. DSA's statement on "Where We Stand" states, "Our conception of socialism is also deeply feminist and anti-racist. We are committed to full equality for women in all spheres of life. . . ."

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