



Janet Stahle-Fraser, "Woman with Red Hair," Part 2 of diptych, handprinted colour woodcut, 1998, 10" x 7".

Economic Globalization, Regionalization, and Women's Movement Organizing in Québec

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Cet article veut redéfinir l'élaboration des politiques publiques dans le Développement régional au Québec et la réponse des groupes de femmes à la régionalisation des interventions publiques dans ce domaine. On lira les raisons et les conditions de l'implication des groupes locaux et régionaux de femmes, acteurs dans ce domaine, ainsi que la nature paradoxale de leurs revendications et les défis organisationnels qu'elles rencontrent. Les tensions qui sous-tendent cette démarche sont aussi mises en valeur.

Economic changes wrought about by globalization do not concern only the global scale. Certainly, economic relations are internationalizing. Production processes are being uprooted from places in advanced industrial countries and are being relocalized abroad. Financial capital has become largely unbounded from national territories and circulates within new spaces of flows. Yet, firms and businesses are also becoming increasingly dependent by their competitive edge on the advantages provided by particular local and regional congregations of favourable economic, social, and political conditions. The economy, it can be said, is becoming simultaneously more global, and more local/regional (Swyngedouw). An increasing mismatch between the scales of economic globalization and the scale of political regulation, vested so far in the nation-state, follows from these transformations. In many parts of Europe and North America over the last fifteen years, the national state has been increasingly perceived as ill-equipped to intervene in the new economic context. As a result, states have displaced part of their powers upwards, towards new supranational agencies and entities such as the European Union, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), etc. They have also devolved capacities and responsibilities downwards to regions, metropolises, and localities. These changes in the scales and spaces of politics are creating new and significant challenges for women's movements (Banaszak *et al.*).

In Canada, Québec is the province that has most extensively engaged in the downward displacement of public intervention. Since the beginning of the 1990s, successive provincial governments have devolved public policymaking and policy management powers to a vast array of newly created regional institutions in the fields of Health and Social Services, Regional Development, Income Security, Job Training, and the Social Economy (on the latter see Côté). This article draws on my current research¹ to focus on the rescaling of public policy in the field of Regional Development, and on women's movement response to the regionalization of public intervention in this domain.

Prior to the 1992 reform granting new planning and spending power to Regional Development Councils (RDCs), Québec women's groups had been quite indifferent to regional development policy, which they saw—rightly—as monopolized by regional business and political elites, as well as dealing with issues that were largely foreign to their own preoccupations (Masson and Tremblay). In the years that followed the reform, however, women's groups were increasingly drawn to this policy area, and this for two main reasons. First, at the beginning of the 1990s, the effects of economic globalization and economic restructuring on women were becoming increasingly visible. Issues of women's employment, training, and poverty, that already were on the agenda of the women's movement, gained a new saliency. The economy, and by extension policies dealing with economic issues, became progressively defined by women's organizations as legitimate objects of feminist intervention. In this context, women's groups perceived RDCs and their policymaking process as a potential lever that could be used to benefit Québec's women. Second, in that very same period "regionalization" was becoming the buzzword in political discourses about the restructuring of public intervention in Québec, and was being implemented in a variety of domains. Political avenues for

representing women were threatening to close up at the provincial level as responsibilities were being displaced towards new regional institutions (Masson). Not getting involved, it was felt in the women's movement, would deprive women from voice, leading to their issues being ignored and even to major setbacks. It was imperative to gain representation in these new arenas.

The 1992 law creating RDCs did not make any provision for women's representation. The neocorporatist model of governance favoured by the Québec government for

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RDCs, however, required a representation of the community sector, together with business elites, unions and public agencies. Intended to be inclusive and representative of a variety of interests, this model offered political leverage to women's groups' claims for participation. Québec women's groups, thus, did not so much contest the rescaling of Regional Development policy-making—as they did in the field of Health and Social Services (Masson)—than engage in struggles for inclusion, demanding representation for women and their issues in the new decision-making arenas of regional development.

In the first years of the reform, the *Tables régionales de concertation de groupes de femmes* (Women's Groups' Regional Tables for Concerted Action) that existed in most of the regions since the mid-1980s, demanded recognition for themselves and their member groups as important actors from their region's community. Furthermore, they argued that the women of their region had to be officially represented for RDCs to be truly representative of their regional communities. A reserved "women's seat" on their RDC's board, which would be held by a delegate of the regional Table of women's groups and would officially serve as a vehicle for representing women's issues in regional development was the institutional mechanism they requested in most of the regions. Despite deep reluctance from some RDCs, women's seats were progressively won in 13 out of the 17 regions between 1992 and 1998.

Under the leadership of the *Tables*, women's committees were also formed in the vast majority of regions, allying women's groups and self-identified feminist individuals from a variety of backgrounds (businesses, unions, agriculture, culture, education, etc.). These women's committees faced the difficult task of defining women's issues

and articulating women's interests in regional development—a policy domain in which little prior feminist analysis, scholarly or militant, was available. Nevertheless, in the first (1992-1998) and second rounds (1999-2004) of Regional Development policy planning exercises, they produced diagnostic analyses of the situation of women in their regions, they defined priorities to be included in their RDC's Strategic Plan, and they decided upon practical interventions for which they proposed collaborative forms of action involving women's groups, RDCs, government departments and other regional institutions

The demands put forward, in the name of women, for inclusion in RDCs' policymaking process foreground certain issues (and not others) and are formulated in certain ways (and not others), this with implications for the feminist politics pursued by regional women's committees, as well as for their reception by RDCs. Because women's committees have been pragmatically committed to producing effective results in a context "not of their own choosing," they have by and large chosen to articulate their claims at the juncture of women's movement discourse and of the broader, state-defined agenda that structures political debate and action in this field. In doing so, they have found themselves simultaneously, resisting and accommodating neoliberal orientations centered on promoting regional cooperation for global competition, technological development, entrepreneurial spirit, and flexible job training, which operate as the main rationale for the devolution of Québec's regional development policy.

On the one hand, it is possible to understand part of the claims put forward by women's committees as a resistance to the flexibilization of the workforce that results both from economic changes and from the political application of neoliberal tenets. The issue of women's employment is, by far, the most important one in the proposals submitted by women's committees in the regional planning exercises. Among their recommendations are: promoting equity of access for women to jobs created in regional economies and to job training, facilitating women's access to work through better transportation and day-care services, diversifying girls' and women's occupational profile, and providing employment services and training programs adapted to the needs of different categories of women. In most of the regions, demands regarding women's training and women's employment have been similarly couched within claims for standard and permanent jobs rather than non-standard and precarious ones. Jobs for women were also to be well-paid, high-quality, well protected by work legislation and assorted with all measures of social protection. In framing their claims in such a way, women's committees have been embracing a wider movement discourse that opposes deregulation and flexibilization of work. They effectively participate, at the regional level, in broader sociopolitical struggles about the role of the state

and the directions taken by economic restructuring.

Such oppositional discourse on employment, however, stands in tension with more ambiguous demands regarding women's entrepreneurship. With 30 percent of Québec businesses owned by women, RDCs should, women's committees argue, provide a firm support to women's entrepreneurship. Proposals include campaigns to promote women's entrepreneurship among the population, regional business communities and financial institutions. They also include the implementation of programs and services answering to the specific difficulties of aspiring and existing women entrepreneurs, notably in terms of access to funding, as well as in terms of access to information and to training, especially in high-technology and export-oriented sectors. Foregrounding women's entrepreneurship is certainly a way of expressing feminist claims for women's full participation in the formal economy and for women's financial independence. It is, however, aligning with (neoliberal) governmental efforts to foster a dynamic, competitive and export-oriented entrepreneurial culture in Québec's regions. It is also promoting forms of labour that, for most self-employed women entrepreneurs, are inherently precarious and generate insufficient revenues, making "women's autonomy" conditional on the vicissitudes of the market and cutting them off from social protection and most social benefits.

Yet again, other demands by women's movement actors have completely bypassed the economic strategies favoured by the Québec government. First, by demanding an increase in the numbers of women in regional decision-making, as well as more adequate and effective representation of women's interests in the development of Québec's regions, women's movement actors have firmly put the gender of democracy and issues of political equality on the agenda of Regional Development policy. Second, women's committees have succeeded in inscribing violence against women and women's safety in a number of regional strategic plans, which is no small feat in a field still mainly defined by economic concerns. Finally, women's committees have made gender visible by highlighting structural inequalities, and they have successfully claimed regional development as a legitimate policy terrain for the treatment of gender issues. All these demands have contributed to challenge and redefine the content, the meanings and the very boundaries of the regionalized politics of regional development in Québec.

It is important to reflect upon the difference that the region, as a new scale for politics, makes for women's movements. As the account I have just provided shows, there clearly has been an acceptance, by women's movement actors in Québec, of the regional scale of policymaking and policy management favoured by the Québec government. Local and regional women's groups have not only chosen to work within the spatial strictures of the new political context: they have literally "brought into existence" women and women's issues at that particular scale.

In effect, their struggles have contributed to territorialize women's issues anew, that is to attach, for the very first time, issues of employment and training, entrepreneurship, political participation, violence, and the like, to the space and scale of governance of the region. In doing so, women's movement groups and their allies have supported and reinforced the construction of the regional scale initiated by the Québec government.

However, while accepting the region as a new scale of political decision-making, women's movement actors have been confronted with the problems associated with the fragmentation of their politics over 17 subnational territories. Regionalization has profoundly altered the conditions of women's organizing, forcing local women's groups, politically mobilized at the provincial level, to reorganize and remobilize at the level of the region.² Each and every dimension of collective action had in fact to be created anew in each of the 17 regions: mobilizing activists and groups around regional development issues, developing expertise in the field, articulating claims, gaining knowledge of the regional political context, striking alliances, developing strategies, and the like. Difficulties associated with such multiplication of organizing efforts quickly led to the creation, in 1995, of a provincial Network—the *Réseau des représentantes en condition féminine aux instances de développement régional*—regrouping delegates to the women's seats and/or representatives of women's committees from each RDC. The creation of the Network aimed at providing a site for activists from the different regions to share information on their respective situations and to foster the development of common political reflections and strategies. The Network also worked at gaining recognition from the provincial Ministry of Regions and the Secretary on the Status of Women.

The very creation and existence of the Network signals a partial contestation of the new hierarchy of political spaces favoured by the Québec government. The composition and the objectives of the Network reaffirm the importance of a coordination, at the provincial scale, of women's movement activism in regionalized policymaking areas. It expresses demands and efforts, by regional women's movement actors, for opening up a political arena of discussion and debate with the government, at the provincial level, despite the shift in governance towards the regions.

By demanding an adequate and effective representation of women's interests in the development of Québec's regions, women's movement actors have put the gender of democracy and issues of political equality on the agenda.

Discussion at the Network also testifies to the continued need for standardized public intervention, or at the very least for guidelines elaborated at and applicable at the provincial scale, as activists have become weary of the array of similar claims being fought for in each RDC with varying measures of success. Since the year 2000, the Network has repeatedly pressed the Ministry of Regions and the Secretary on the Status of Women to ensure that a minimum set of measures would be implemented in all RDCs. These pressures have so far been unsuccessful. At the same time, they have been more about principle than content: members of the Network themselves have been remarkably vague on what these minimum guidelines would encompass beyond “a better representation of women and of their interests in regional development.” Such vagueness is a direct consequence of the adhesion of women’s movement actors to the regionalist ideology professed in Québec’s regional milieu. This ideology, endorsed for the time being by the provincial government, favours respect for regional autonomy—that is, the capacity of regions to determine their own priorities—and for regional specificity over the “imposition” of provincially-defined and provincially-applicable measures. Feminist strategizing at the Network appears torn between the regionalist loyalties of its members and their parallel awareness of the unevenness in the treatment of women’s issues that follows from the absence of enforceable provincial standards.

To conclude: a new Liberal government, elected in April of 2003, has significantly transformed RDCs, replacing them with new councils and jeopardizing in the process all existing mechanisms of women’s representation. As women’s movement actors are reorganizing in each region to regain lost ground, the tensions that underlie their involvement in the regionalization process are likely to persist. First, women’s movements’ capacity to influence policy at the regional level depends upon the political form taken by the governance of regionalized policy processes. Institutional arrangements may be rendered more inclusive of marginalized groups; they may also remain exclusionary. And as Québec activists have learned since April 2003, inclusion may not be secured once and for all. Second, the capacity of women’s movement actors to shape policy and benefit women also depends on discursive strategies that partially align with the policy priorities of the institutions that they seek to influence. A pragmatic framing of claims featuring a complex and sometimes paradoxical dynamic of accommodation and contestation may very well be a necessary condition for effecting change in and through regional development institutions. Finally, downward rescaling fragments policymaking and fragments contestation, multiplying organizing efforts and difficulties, and parceling out advances. Movements’ gains in one region may not be extended to any others, least to the provincial territory. The scale of state regulation—of the economy,

of labour training, of political participation—is thus a central issue. Sacrificing some regional autonomy in favour of higher scale, provincial modes of intervention may be another necessary condition for progressive women’s movement politics in Regional Development.

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²It is important to note that women’s movement struggles, and women’s organizations at the provincial scale/level have not disappeared in the process. Yet the existence of new regional sites of politics and forms of organizing is adding a new layer to women’s movement strategizing and complicates coordinating efforts.

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