

Organizing Strategies and Mediations

BY SOMER BRODRIBB

L'auteure examine les stratégies féministes pour un changement local et mondial à travers les récits venus des féministes du communautaire, des initiatives issues des organisations anti-racistes et nationales sur la violence faite aux femmes et de l'impact de la mondialisation sur ces organismes et autres organisations féministes transnationales.

There is much to learn from the politically savvy, from women's reflections on activism and struggle. Work that is decidedly political, theoretically complex and personally engaged can make a contribution to organizing for change both in analysis and action. Insights gained through political engagement provide new perspectives and analyses, new forms of connection and organization, new spaces for feminist political imagination and realization.

I examine several wise political histories, analyses, and moments that emerge from and offer profound insights into contemporary feminist practice and theory. The problem of organization is stressed in these examples primarily in the context of how the structures and processes of neo-liberalism intersect with the energies, memories, desires, actions, and experiences of feminist and anti-racist activists. My analysis of feminist organizing experiences suggests that global capital and state power and the mediating practices of feminist practitioners still need to be confronted in both theory and practice. For while there has been a renewed interest in building global feminist alliances, not enough attention has been paid to how transnational feminist networks and NGOs function and

are positioned in relation to globalization and the grassroots. The conceptual practices of resistance and the actual creation of solidarity and radical agency require critical attention to the strategies of interface with mediating processes and economies which manoeuvre discourses of representation and democracy.

Honor Ford Smith's article on the Sistren Theatre Collective in Jamaica is one of the few studies to engage in an organizational analysis that asks questions about power relations in feminist groups, and about how to sustain the momentum of change. Her multi-layered framework places Sistren's processes and conflicts within the dynamics of international capital and funding agencies working to maintain Jamaican economic dependency. Within her critical structural analysis of state power, IMF practices, and colonial history, Honor Ford Smith brings to life the personal and political agency, the desires, identities, subjectivities, dreams, and conflicts of the women in an innovative group working on cultural production.

In addition to analyzing the local and global economic and political forces that constrained the group's potential and activities, Ford Smith centers the group's organizational structure and processes, the contradictions of collectivity, and the strains and erasures in the group's public and hidden transcripts. In particular, she shows how the exciting center of the project (uncovering the knowledge and experience of Jamaican working class culture) was lost. Emerging skills were not validated or adequately integrated there was no time to attend to emerging methods

and knowledges, to consider the insights and understandings that were coming forward. One of Sistren's unique, creative and problematic features was that it brought together working-class and middle-class women. But this and the processes of creolization and transculturation that were coming into view were not taken into account in terms of the politics and aesthetics of representation. Sistren's goals of cultural production and education were displaced by funding agency requirements of income generation. In this context, a popular theatre collective whose original purpose was to unearth and circulate hidden working-class women's experiences did not have the time, space, structure or resources—essentially, the power—to examine and take lessons from this and its own work, its own drama and experience as integral part and fraught context of their knowledge production. And yet, Ford Smith says “we were attempting and achieving some

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powerful and positive relations” between racialized working-class and middle-class women (244).

Issues of power in feminist organizations and communities are not mere distractions of identity, and little feminist work has engaged with complex economic contexts, colonial histories, and group political

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dynamics with this clarity and political intelligence. On the ground, how to organize in coalition remains “the million dollar question” (Ladd qtd. in Robertson 320). The organizing experiences of exuberance and exhaustion discussed below confirm and continue this questioning.

Angela Robertson, a Canadian anti-racist feminist writer and housing activist, poses some necessary questions about organizational and political practices. Robertson’s roundtable discussion with five¹ anti-racist, feminist “front-line activists” (309) in 1998 provides an overview of the challenges to ongoing, effective organizing in Ontario and Nova Scotia. These obstacles include global economic restructuring and its local impacts, a climate of political backlash and retrenchment, the quick erosion of hard-won successes in terms of employment equity and labour standards, the co-optation, distortion, and erasure of language, unsuccessful engagements with pro-

gressive political parties. The organizers agreed that there had been “an incredible loss of connection” (317) to issues of class and to working-class and poor women.

One of the things that keeps on getting in the way is class. We keep on putting most of our emphasis on gender, second on race and then maybe class. The anti-poverty struggle is just mentioned... (316)

Related to this is the issue of how protests become represented, negotiated, and aligned with/in the structures of state power. Feminist and anti-racist activists have pushed for inclusion and representation, and demanded that attention to systemic discrimination and systemic racism become part of the government’s agenda. Subsequent gains in employment equity have been made because of this social protest, not because of the benign nature and sudden wisdom of policy makers. However, ensuing state consultations on these issues have tended to benefit a privileged few among feminist, anti-racist practitioners; grassroots work and perspectives have generally been mainstreamed and managed. This process of co-optation and inclusion has closed the points of entry and access both to social protest and to state mechanisms. State mechanisms for inclusion expired after the initial showcasing, but activists’ engagement with state processes continues and has meant a disengagement (of time, energy, and attention) from movement issues and organizing needs. State rituals of consultation and other practices remain framed by dominant interests at the hub of the network, during the course of which points of entry to state mechanisms as well as movement connections can disappear. Beverly Bain confronts co-optation and the limits of consultation:

That goes back to the whole thing about mainstreaming the

work that we have done at the grassroots level. It has become co-opted by the state, and we no longer have those points of entry anymore. The reason why we are looking for somebody else to do it is because we have become so oriented to those mechanisms which were set up for us. “Who’s going to call us? Who’s going to tell us that there is another mechanism set up?” We got caught up with all these bureaucratic mechanisms set up by the state. And now that they have taken all that away we are lost, waiting to be called again. (qtd. in Robertson 326)

Waiting to be nominated by state agencies to represent the movement to state agencies is a broader issue in this period of economic and political restructuring of social movements that are intimidated by labels of “identity politics” and “special interest groups” and are hoping to blend with “social justice.”

There are many balanced and nuanced accounts of reforms achieved under and through neoliberalism, and yet it remains the case that quite a few feminist strategies and discourses of representation, inclusion, equity, and diversity have been showcased, managed, and incorporated. Identity and representation can circulate according to prevailing market discourses and power relations. The role of mediators in this process of “negotiating” with state and class power (and the role of interfacing cultures such as equity offices, race relations offices or NGOs) is pivotal to keeping the system organized and working.

This dependence on waiting to get picked for state consultations is brought to light in Andrea Levan’s analysis of the consultative processes of The Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women. Levan’s case study adds to the considerable critique of feminist engagement with the state but also contributes to our understanding of women’s political loss

and learning. She examines the state's engagement with feminism and deployment of a feminist language for inclusion and representation. Levan's study analyzes how some women were coopted by the "waiting-to-be-called" game of representation, a structure of appointment which privileged or credited a few individuals and ignored years of substantial work by large feminist groups on the issue of violence against women. The government agency picked women for the Advisory Group and the Panel according to identity, not feminist or anti-racist experience and politics, a conflicted and distorted strategy of inclusion and representation which eventually contributed to a controversial decision by some national feminist groups to remove support from the largest government initiative to date on violence against women. Representing women, getting credit, and having credibility is not only an individual conceit or simply a dictate of state power. Professional status and a certain socio-economic background rather than political experience are often required for appointment to the "boards" of feminist organizations by "the community," itself often an abstraction and the bread and ally of the entrepreneurial, respectable representative.

Levan's outline of the failures of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women and its symbolic closure of one period and practice for change reveals that it is even more important now to rethink feminist engagement with the state and produce new organizational and political strategies for the future. Beverly Bain argues that the current organizing climate is one where the larger context has closed its points of entry and moved on. In all three cases, these activists/analysts discerned this closure. This closure was facilitated by activists' tactical manoeuvres to either capture the discourse or seize points of entry into governmentality without adequate challenges to the

state's organization of identity, community, and representation.

These three reflexive reconsiderations of goals and organizing processes speak of a substantial sense of political powerlessness and a loss of connection to and even within democratic social movement. In each case, there was much organized consultation with and less sustained confrontation of state power, and much neglect of women's knowledges and mass movement communication. Critical understandings of mediating practices and places of entry into bureaucratic power were neglected and analyses of class and state power were largely abandoned. The role and creation of an entire interface culture of state/community in all its diversity was abandoned as a site for theoretical and political contestation in the Foucauldian climate of the 1990s. Supposedly the head of the king had been cut off, yet it appeared to circulate in the currency of incorporation. The sovereign's head is only one side of the coin: every mediator can have her day and claim there was no power in it. Representation becomes a small business and negotiation sets the price. Carol Ann Wright in "Continuing on the Ground" provides an important analysis of the consequences of mediating practices:

...over the last ten years, anti-racism has created a lucrative industry for anti-racist practitioners. I think that has done a lot of damage. The larger struggle has been co-opted, we participated in that to some degree, those of us who have been anti-racist practitioners are those who have done it. People have gotten away with a lot in terms of co-opting the language and watering down policies. The bottom line of this discussion should be are Black women and women of colour struggling any less? We're struggling more on issues of racism. (qtd. in Robertson 314)

In their discussions for the future,

Honor Ford Smith and the participants in the "Continuing on the Ground" roundtable have a certain nostalgia for the loss of a conducive socialist/social-democratic context for women's organizing despite its complexities. Both articles point to the potential of international alliances and global movements to pry open space and make change. However, problems of globalization, solidarity, power, and representation at the transnational level still demand new perspectives, new strategies, and practices. Much of women's transnational organizing is networked through NGOs. As Swasti Mitter and Sheila Rowbotham argue in their work on women, technology, and globalization in Asia:

Problems exist too in the internal structures, practices and attitudes of both the NGOs and the unions themselves. The term "NGO" is very vague and covers organizations and groups which are very different. Some are large democratically run structures, while others are tiny research groups, self-help centers or community projects. "NGOs" can be basically self-appointed, which raises problems about their relation to the communities they claim to represent. While some are rooted and embedded in lo-

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cal neighbourhoods, others might survive simply because they are adept at doing funding applications. NGOs thus can replicate in microcosm problems which have become evident in efforts to create participatory structures to transpose needs into policy at the level of national states. (394).

A critical analysis of how women's transnational networks are organized and function over time is urgently required. It is essential to question "virtuous," local and "grassroots" organizing, transnational advocacy networks and processes of globalization, nongovernmentality and NGOs. "Constructing Global Feminism: Transnational Advocacy Networks and Russian Women's Activism" is a study of the mediating practices of American feminist academics and Russian intermediaries who collaborate to fund, organize and offer skills to grassroots women's groups in Russia (Sperling, Ferree and Risman). The role of the American and Russian feminist mediators, their positionality and contradictions, is contextualized within transnational political and economic restructuring. This was a context where the mediators could both preempt and draw power from the threat of mass protest, and offer the local group education, skills, and resources for activism. The western funding structure fostered competition and jealousy among the local women's groups and inserted a financial disincentive to collaborative, inclusive, and democratic organizing for the local groups.

"The grassroots" is often invoked by feminist organizers as a "morally pure terrain innocent of politics" (Mindry 1202), and at the same time the primordial site of change and credibility. In "Nongovernmental Organizations, "Grassroots," and the Politics of Virtue" Deborah Mindry shows how both NGOs and the grassroots are highly politicized sites where women are implicated in the processes of globalization, economic re-

structuring, and colonial practices at all levels in complex ways. In a democratizing South Africa facing the influx of aid, investment and international interest in trade with a stable, liberalized state, new opportunities for women's political participation opened up for those who could claim to represent the grassroots. "Women knew that the way up the social, political and economic ladders in South Africa demanded working their way up through the hierarchies of power in the supralocal NGO world" (Mindry 1191) and there was no lack of advice on how to do so through entrepreneurial empowerment.

There are many different actors invested in the grassroots, not only local and international NGOs but also funding agencies, state agencies, development consulting agencies (who advise grassroots actors in how to represent themselves as successful agents of transformation and to develop manuals, training programs, and project proposals,) legal advisors, and so on. (Mindry 1203)

How hegemony works now needs to be understood through an analysis of NGOs and the use of "the grassroots," including an analysis of feminist engagement with transnational capital and state power.

Conclusions

These reconsiderations of the political engagements of the 1980s and 1990s suggest a renewed struggle for position at the turn of the century.² Most of the achievements claimed were transformations in education and consciousness. Honor Ford Smith reflects on the profound creativity in knowledge and new relations that was underway in Sistren but neglected for lack of time. The "Continuing on the Ground" roundtable recognizes that feminist and anti-racist publishing, scholar-

ship, and education made significant gains and produced lasting changes. The protests over the Advisory Panel on Violence Against Women were successful largely because of the support and recognition for the years of experience, study, and knowledge of the women's movement on issues of violence. Change occurred and endured through oppositional knowledges, not through the much more ephemeral points of entry into consolidated state power. But while the Russian women's groups highly valued the educational skills and resources and western feminist literature they could access through the transnational networks, it is evident the knowledge was not itself transnational: it came from somewhere. Mindry makes clear that local knowledges and needs did not receive priority and alternative visions of global relations were also subsumed and neglected. Therefore, in emphasizing a strategy of education and transformations in consciousness, it is important to remember the political and economic processes that create and validate any knowledge. And in the turn from engagement with the state to a supposedly more virtuous, satisfying, and worthy terrain of "the community," it is important also to remember how communities and relationships to them are also sites of struggle fully implicated in geopolitical processes and marketist ideologies.

What emerges from these accounts and analyses, which must be of concern in Women's Studies and in feminist organizing, is the lack of time and inclination to consider the relations of class and power in women's lives and the knowledge that emerges from experience in political work. At the center of this is whether women's strategies of resistance and experiences of mediation are valued and recognized. Such histories of struggle provide strong lessons in knowledge and power that can inform future strategies and practices.

Of course, this is the focus and energy that have been displaced by

processes of domination, and the organizing process is the act of resistance by reclaiming and making connections. But what is lost when those connections and knowledges are neglected in feminist organizing? Revolutionary agency is temporal, and the ways communities of political resistance can be sustained so that resistance endures and change takes place in the current context are central questions of organization and strategy. These are temporal concerns and not the single occurrences of an international conference or the appointment of an employment equity officer. Bernice Reagon thinks through praxis as she speaks of the necessity of political thinking: "It might be wise as you deal with coalition efforts to think about the possibilities of going for fifty years. It calls for some care" (361). Otherwise, theorists, practitioners, and activists repeat the legitimizing techniques of bourgeois power and communication, not the wisdom of feminist and anti-racist resistance, grounded and organized, creating new forms of politics.

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ing Scholar at the Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Studies, University of Toronto.

¹The roundtable participants were: Pramilla Aggarwal, Deena Ladd, Beverly Bain, Angela Robertson and Carol Ann Wright, moderated by Enakshi Dua.

²The phrase "continuing on the ground," for example, is a good example of a call for a "war of position." For further discussion of Gramscian terms and analysis applied to the current context of left politics in Toronto, see Conway.

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AJA MCKINNEY

I woke up this morning
 My marriage bran new
 I wanted to fill his stomach with the best of the best
 Let him relax on dryer clean sheets
 Rub his balled head down to his feet
 Walked to the store, Florida sun beaming down on my skin
 Bought lobster tails and tiger shrimp
 Bought movies to please him and take his mind off things
 But I cam home to a man of high tones, mean words, and a
 mouth full of shit
 And I ended up in a shelter
 Hamburger meat that I burnt in a pot
 Cheap sauce, can peas, boxed milk, cigarette buds
 Alone, alone, alone
 But I can't complain it's better then home.