When Edward Bellamy wrote his famous utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, in 1888, his setting was the future in 2001. He would be disappointed to discover that we are not only far from a socialist utopia, but it seems we are travelling in the opposite direction towards unrestrained, “vampire” capitalism. Even over the past thirty years, the strength and nature of socialist ideals have altered fairly dramatically: what seemed politically possible in 1975 was no longer so in 1995. Precisely because of the disappointing decline and fragmentation of the Left since the 1970s, I’ve probably reread and reconsidered the historiography relating to the Left more intensely than other writing.

Our views on politics and theory are shaped by the context in which we write, and this is particularly true of “The Communist Party and the Woman Question, 1922–1929,” researched and written in the late 1970s and early 1980s as part of my doctoral dissertation, which was later revised as a book, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920–1950*. Abridged from an article published in *Labour/Le Travail* in 1984, this piece was written at a time when theoretical debates concerning capitalism and patriarchy and discussions about socialist-feminist political organizing were front and centre. During the 1970s and 1980s, many feminists were probing the relationship between class and sex/gender systems: the outpouring of writing on dual systems (i.e., capitalism and patriarchy) theory, (including critiques of dual systems theories), social reproduction, the domestic labour debate, women as a reserve army of labour (or not), sexing class and classing sex, and so on was quite remarkable. Much of this writing attempted to use a revitalized, more flexible and open Marxism — the product of New Left and ‘new’ social history theorizing — along with feminist analyses to
create Marxist-feminist theories. I found more than one strand of Marxist- 
feminist writing compelling: one was epitomized by Sheila Rowbotham’s 
writing, which was in turn shaped by both feminism and the Marxist 
humanism often associated with E.P. Thompson, while the other strand 
was a more structural fusion of Marxism and feminism represented by the 
work of Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh. Rowbotham’s emphasis on 
women’s experiences, human agency, and contradiction resonated with 
my own interests, on the one hand, while Barrett and McIntosh’s discus-
sion of the ‘anti-social’ family under capitalism, gender, ideology, and the 
family wage also had an impact. Both these streams of writing addressed 
class relations and took a critical view of the male-headed family as it was 
experienced within capitalism; both suggested the need for radical social 
transformation. These critiques of the family were later criticized for being 
‘race blind,’ as they certainly were, though I think some elements of the 
Marxist-feminist critique of the idealized nuclear family remain relevant 
today; moreover, they have been taken up and revised by a new group 
of Marxist feminists who pay far more attention to heteronormativity.

The second impetus for this article, and likewise for my Dreams of 
Equality book, was the exciting expansion of socialist-feminist organiz-
ing, the latter designating a somewhat broader politic than Marxist-fem-
inism, taking in those who had a critique of capitalism and who saw the 
goals of feminism and socialism as inseparable. In the late 1970s and into 
the 1980s, socialist feminists were active on multiple fronts. There had 
emerged a number of ‘new communist’ Marxist-Leninist parties, some 
of which were involved in the autonomous women’s movement, while 
others were organizing women in the workforce. In Hamilton, Ontario, 
where I lived, the Revolutionary Workers League was involved in cam-
paigns like Women Back into Stelco, as well as important labour move-
ment support work, where our paths often crossed. Socialist-feminists 
were also active in more broadly based groups, such as Toronto’s Interna-
tional Women’s Day Committee (IWDC), Ontario Working Women, and 
Saskatchewan Working Women — to name a few. For a time, some of us 
established a Hamilton Working Women group, also dedicated to union 
support work. If Marxist-feminism was the ‘theory,’ all these efforts were 
the ‘practice,’ and they raised what we thought were key questions for 
socialists-feminists. Was social democracy à la the NDP worth supporting?
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(We organized, not very successfully, Left caucuses within the party.) Was a vanguard party in fact the ideal way forward? (I admit I was influenced by some of the anti-Leninist writing of British socialist-feminists.) Was separate feminist organizing necessary to ensure that women’s oppression would be a fundamental element of socialist politics? This conjuncture of theory and politics led to a curiosity about the history of women on the Left and a desire to connect past and present understandings of socialist-feminism. As I researched, I also began to question the dominant ‘two wave’ description of feminism that designated the period between 1920 and 1960 as something of a political trough, a model that seemed to be contradicted by the history of women on the Left.

Both this article and Dreams of Equality were written as overviews that did not focus intently on any one woman or delve primarily into any one issue (trade union work, for instance), or focus on one province or city, though there was a regional focus on Ontario and the West. My attention was concentrated on political parties, rather than the entire Left, and on what might be called programmatic and organizing issues: what were the changing perspectives on ‘the woman question’ in the organized Left, why did these particular priorities emerge, and how were they put into practice — or not? Given the Marxist-feminist debates at the time about the family wage ideal, I was also interested in women’s perceived and expected role in the family, their domestic labour, and how the Left understood and negotiated the dominant ideas of family and female domesticity. And given the attempts, taking place around me, to recruit women into Left parties, I wondered what economic, intellectual, and social forces had drawn women to the earlier Left. That question necessitated attention to ethnicity as well as gender and class, since the Communist Party’s three dominant cultural language groups were an integral part of its history. Without language skills and with only limited translations to rely on, my answers were underdeveloped, and it was only later, when I had access to more extensive translations of the Ukrainian paper for women, Robitnystia, that I could begin to talk about how important, and how closely intertwined, ethnicity, gender, class and culture were in communist history.

There were also issues and approaches that I did not explore or stress at the time but that have come to the fore in subsequent feminist theorizing.
and historical writing. One was attention to image, representation, and literature. I found the pictures and cartoons in the CCF and communist papers fascinating, and there was some writing on socialist iconography at the time, but I did not analyze these representations at any length, even though they were a rich primary source that revealed much about the gendered nature of socialist discourses. Later writing, often drawing on modes of literary analyses, addressed representation and culture far more; some writing also explored the much broader literary Left that existed beyond the borders of Left parties. Second, despite a concern with ethnicity, ‘race’ and imperialism were not central to my analysis, yet much could be said, for instance, about communist writing on imperialism, including its views on women in colonized countries, and much has been said about the CCF’s understanding of Aboriginal peoples and colonialism. Third, because I did not focus on any one woman, biography was not utilized as a window into the Left, nor did I explore in any depth key relationships between left-wing women, looking at how friendship and politics were intertwined: both these themes have been explored with great insight by subsequent authors. I sometimes mourn lost opportunities in this regard. On the one hand, I think I should have asked more critical questions of some of my interviewees whom I was reluctant to challenge, most particularly communists who were already suspicious of my political motives. On the other hand, I wish I had done multiple interviews with women who deserve far more than they have received from posterity. Alberta’s Nellie Peterson is just one example, and every time I see her in the film Prairie Women (which I regularly show to my women’s history class) I feel moved, as I remember so vividly her intelligence, feistiness, and political integrity. Finally, my critical take on the Left’s acceptance — or even idealization (to varying degrees, of course) — of the nuclear, male-breadwinner family and its inability to completely challenge patriarchal ideas did not explore heterosexuality and heterosexism, even though the nuclear, male-breadwinner family simultaneously denoted a heterosexual family. Despite some sympathy for alternative family forms and sexual innovation within the communist Left in the twenties, an acceptance, and sometimes an idealization of heterosexual relations came to characterize both the communist and social democratic Left to a great degree: this too still needs more exploration.
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There are also some interpretive issues that remain contested in 2010, just as they were in 1980. In communist history, the relationship between the international movement (led decisively by the USSR after the mid-1920s), the national party, and local activities remains in dispute in both Canadian and American historiography, though the latter writing is more polarized on this issue. When I wrote in the 1980s, I was influenced particularly by (American) New Left reappraisals of the CPUSA that focused on single campaigns, issues, or organizing at the local level; these works were important attempts to move beyond the Cold War characterizations of the party as nothing but Moscow-controlled.11 I attempted to do some of the same, but establishing a balanced understanding of this tripartite relationship as it shifted over time was difficult and was complicated by the lack of archival resources relating to the Comintern, some of which, in the aftermath of the implosion of the USSR, have now come to light. In retrospect, I think I too easily collapsed the issue of the Stalinization of the party with the issue of Moscow control — though they were connected, they were not one and the same.12

Interestingly, one current of recent scholarship still insists that we must focus primarily on the “local” communist scene,13 a stance that not only airbrushes out some critical questions about how the party functioned at the centre but, more importantly, stunts a better understanding of how the triangulated relations of the international, national, and local operated. After all, in the interwar period discussed in the article below, the international movement, led by the USSR, and the central party apparatus played a role in determining how the issue of women’s oppression was addressed — along with local conditions, cultures, and women’s own efforts to interpret party directives. I wonder if the socialist vacuum that appears to reign across North America in our times has encouraged some historians to emphasize the ‘best’ side of the party, such as their militant unionization efforts and local organizing against unemployment and racism. This may also be one reason that the culture of the Popular Front, seemingly a period of some degree of unity and collaboration on the Left, is seen so positively.14 In a recent article, one American historian calls for a “less partisan,” more “detached” history of communism, placing its historical figures “into a world where everything is understood and all sins are forgiven” (are we never to be critical of the
Communist Party?). She caricatures those still interested in the party’s actual program as “wounded participants,” caught up in irrelevant Cold Wars; the superior approach, she asserts, with great certainty, would focus on topics such as the “culture” of the Popular Front. It is fascinating that after so many years of poststructuralist writing that has sharpened our attention to the ‘always political’ discursive construction of history, authors like this assume other people’s writing is partisan and political, while theirs somehow rises above this problematic burden. Her liberal argument for “detached” scholarship ignores the fact that one can’t so easily separate the cultural and political in the history of the Left.

Writing on local manifestations and specific campaigns of communism on both sides of the border has enriched our understanding of rank-and-file activities, which were always more likely to encompass women, but dismissing political debates about party program and priorities as “intellectual quibbles” mysteriously depoliticizes historical actors who were profoundly political and who believed that these were key issues. Indeed, even when I interviewed people who had left the party, they were often still deeply engaged in debates about its programmatic platform. Again, the current political context is likely influential in shaping these arguments. The emphasis on valuing the concrete, ‘practical’ (non-revolutionary) activities of local communists may reflect a certain left-liberal/social democratic sense of superiority (or even resignation) in current times, as well as a rejection of the so-called ultra-left of the sixties and seventies. In American writing particularly, Marxist-Leninist parties of this period are often stigmatized as the wild, unrealistic wreckers of a more diffuse, open, eclectic radicalism. They are portrayed as ‘mistakes,’ even in the words of some of their former members, including feminists who were understandably critical of the gendered power structures in vanguard parties. What is quite puzzling, however, is how you can love the Popular Front but hate vanguard parties, which, however way you cut it, the CPUSA and CPC ultimately were. The intense hostility and disdain I have seen at academic conferences from self-designated progressives towards any person who appears to have retained a modicum of revolutionary commitment to socialism (most especially Trotskyists, whom everyone seems to resent, even though they did not establish any gulags) is very strong. This is an atmosphere rather different from that of the 1970s.
It would be simplistic if not erroneous to claim that Canadian debates about communist history are carbon copies of American ones (which are themselves often oversimplified). Discussion about the relative roles of the local and the international in shaping the party, to take one example, is more polarized in the United States than in Canada, where more ‘in-between’ explanations have emerged. This likely reflects the presence of a far stronger ‘spy’ school of communist historiography in the US and perhaps also the successful cultivation of a more deep-seated fear of socialism, which seems ascendant at this point in time. As a result, left-leaning academics who fear the undue influence of the ‘spy’ school are less inclined to explore Leninism and the complicated history of the Comintern and more inclined to study local unemployment marches, antiracism, and rent strikes.

In Canada, Ian McKay has suggested a historical approach that looks at what many leftists shared in common, rather than simply what divided them, “writing generally about the Left.” This too may reflect a feeling, different from the mood of the 1970s, that in such bleak times of apparently unending neoliberal successes, we need to be Unitarians, welcoming any and all leftists who appear to object to the status quo or, as McKay puts it, all those who understand that humans should be able to “live otherwise”— a rather open-ended definition. McKay’s more recent writing has provided us with a detailed and rich account of early socialist organizations and ideas that preceded the Communist Party, but whether his suggested ‘new’ methodology of “reconnaissance” breaks from previous whig stories, hierarchies, and certainties, as he claims, is more questionable. Reconnaissance, according to McKay, is a “preliminary examination,” a “scouting out” of the past that is more “provisional,” questioning, and “heterogeneous,” rather than dogmatic and sectarian. Nor is it a “synthesis,” for a synthesis browbeats us with its confining, “authoritative” form, often simply “fortifying” what we already know. McKay contrasts his reconnaissance to the previous writing on the Left that assumed a “scorecard” approach, assigning to this or that author “stars and demerit points based on his or her present day politics.” How this is substantively (rather than rhetorically) different from McKay’s reconnaissance, which he claims is a “political act of research,” is not entirely clear. Invoking countless analogies and metaphors that denigrate previous writing as
“ancestor worship,” “polemics,” “self-satisfied mystifications,” “great man history”— to name a few — McKay suggests that a reconnaissance will liberate us from the “tiresome sectarianism and sentimentalism” that has hamstrung socialist historiography.26 These negative characterizations of past writing, often with no citations as proof, set up a convenient straw historian against which to position his writing, though they seem to go against the grain of an open-minded ‘reconnaissance.’

While I find McKay’s exploration of new themes, including gender, very enriching, I do not think the method of a ‘reconnaissance’ offers us a radically new and useful way of recontextualizing the history of women and the Left; at worst, reconnaissance can become an assertion of superiority rather than a method at all.27 Can we really offer ‘scout-like’ observations about history, untethered from all judgments and hierarchies? McKay himself notes that historians must ascertain whether “some paths are more important than others,”28 and like many of us writing about the Left, he too has some implicit ‘scorecards,’ though we do not need to use such a pejorative word for what are essentially evaluations of historiography and history. He establishes certain issues and thinkers he sees as central (putting immense emphasis on Spencer’s influence); he positions his interpretation within his own ‘liberal order framework,’ which provides a synthetic framework for Canadian history; his assessment of other historians’ works lays out more and less useful approaches;29 and past socialists are also described in words that convey positive and less positive values.30 One argument feminists in the 1980s put forward about knowledge production remains pertinent to these debates about how we reconstruct the Left: while committed to portraying, as much as possible, the “heterogeneity” of women’s lives, they argued that we must also own up to the political values and priorities that animate our writing, rather than masking or disguising them, so that readers will be able to engage critically with our arguments.31 An emphasis on heterogeneity and indeterminacy is not value-free, or somehow above other ‘politically invested’ approaches, for heterogeneity, too, is a politics of sorts, a way of looking at history that needs critical interrogation.

New questions, themes, and sources have deepened and broadened our understanding of the Left since I wrote in the 1980s, but this does not mean that all subjects and approaches we used in the past are passé. For
example, assessing communists’ political program and their efforts to mobilize women will likely remain important to Left history. A program, after all, was never an inert set of political slogans but rather a call to action, a set of suggested values, an inspiration to organize, and sometimes a directive, which may or may not have been followed. It was lived out, not only within the strict bounds of the party, but also outside of it in sympathetic ethnic organizations, grassroots arts groups, community protests, even within the family. We also still need to ask what roles women assumed in the party, and whether it promoted a vision of gender equality that differed from past socialist ideas and from the dominant ideologies of the time, and if so, how and why. Do I think that the party’s abandonment of its support for legal and free birth control in the early 1930s was a step backward? Actually I do, even if that is a ‘scorecard’ approach. Contra Van Gosse’s description of the CPUSA in the 1920s as a party characterized by masculinist “workerism,” “denying and denigrating” the familial, I think the CPC at this time made some innovative efforts (however limited) to speak to working-class women, addressing issues that had been largely avoided by previous Canadian socialists — such as birth control.32 This does not mean we need to judge past actresses by current political standards, even if we are drawing on the insights of present-day feminist theory. We need to understand how they defined political issues and interpreted concepts like oppression, equality, feminism, and socialism in the context of their times, even if those were not the words they used at the time. In this regard, I think the term I used two decades ago —‘militant mothering’— remains a useful metaphor for one current of left-wing organizing. The notion that women’s maternal and domestic work, responsibilities, and social roles shaped their outlook and feelings, and thus their political needs and roles, was one component of communist thinking and strategizing. ‘Militant mothering’ reflected some aspects of the dominant, popular ideology of motherhood, but it also reconfigured the popular ideal significantly, taking a different class form, challenging notions of passive, apolitical, and ‘home-centred’ motherhood. This is not to say that this is the only approach communists embraced, and more recent biographies have also shown that some women leaders found it a constraining and contradictory ideology.33

The problem with our analyses of various ideologies of maternalism, later authors argued persuasively, was how loosely and widely the word
‘maternalist’ could be employed, taking in ideology, subjectivity, and tactics, stretching from fascist to communist women, and from those stressing biology to those who saw motherhood as socially constructed. We needed to hone our definitions and analysis of maternalism. Even within the Communist Party, women’s maternalist statements drew on both essentialist and nonessentialist rhetoric, something that I needed to explore more fully. Molly Ladd-Taylor’s suggestion that maternalism was an ideology about a “uniquely feminine value system based on care and nurturance” partially describes communist women, but they did not necessarily see all mothers “united across class, and race.” Still, I do not think we have to abandon the concept of maternalism entirely. Rather, we should avoid using it as a general paradigm, analyzing instead the very specific kinds of maternalist ideologies women developed, shaped by historical context, class and race relations, and political beliefs. Within the Communist Party in the 1920s, militant mothering was simultaneously a strategy of engagement developed by a male-dominated party and a deeply held belief on women’s part concerning their important role in social reproduction and the need for communists to address family concerns. And given the growth of Women’s Labor Leagues in the 1920s, these two forces combined might actually work well, drawing women into the movement.

Notes


production” thus seems to me to simplify theoretical discussions of this period: Hester Eisestein, *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women’s Labour and Ideas to Exploit the World* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 203.


5 Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review*, 56 (Mar–April 2009), 110. Ironically, some scholars have recently suggested that feminists’ political focus in the 1970s on ‘tearing down’ the family wage ideal unwittingly “provided a key ingredient of the new spirit of neoliberalism,” namely the low wage, multi-earner family, an interesting but not unproblematic argument.


17 One exception is Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (New York: Verso, 2002), though he only deals with Maoist parties.


20 Ibid.


23 Ibid., 94.


25 Ibid., 2.

26 Ibid., 82.


29 To cite one example, he notes that Janice Newton’s writing on early women socialists sets up unnecessary “dualisms” and that it “minimizes” women’s contributions to the Left. Explanations with more “complexity and agency” are thus needed. Critical assessments like this are an essential part of history writing, but it is not useful to set up a dichotomy between this ‘acceptable’ critical commentary and the very ‘bad’ (whoever they are) scorecard historians of the past. See McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 288.

30 For example, he is critical of atheists who offered “vicious” critiques of religion but sees those who did not as more tolerant (ibid., 248).


32 Van Gosse compares this negative workerism to a positive “sea change” in discourse in 1930–31 concerning gender and the family. His comment may point to different communist histories in Canada and the United States, or it is possible it does not fully represent American communism in the 1920s (which in the us was also characterized by some lingering avant-garde views on sex and private life). This is another reason to be wary of assuming American historiography always fits in Canada. See Van Gosse, “To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home: The Gender Politics of American Communists Between the Two Wars,” *Radical History Review* 50 (1991): 118, 124.

33 Johnston, *A Great Restlessness*.


35 Kathleen Brown makes this point about social reproduction in “‘The Savagely Fathered and Un-Mothered World’ of the Communist Party, usa: Feminism, Maternalism, and ‘Mother Bloor,’” *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 537–70. However, I think the Canadian example was different in terms of timing and the importance of a change in party priorities: I think women were drawn to the party as the Third Period thawed and the Popular Front emerged because the party line now encouraged more avenues for community organizing on family issues (i.e., on social reproduction) and eschewed denunciations of all other left-wing women (except for Trotskyists, of course, who were always the ultimate enemy), making coalitions easier.