

A Very Short Summary of Socialist Feminist Theory and Practice*

Socialist feminism arose in the late 1960's. It grew out of the same social ferment and the same consciousness-raising groups that produced other forms of feminism. Socialist feminists attempted to produce a creative synthesis of debates raging in the feminist community in the 1970's about the roots of the oppression of women. At the crux of socialist feminist thought is the understanding that not just one system of oppression is at the heart of women's subordination; rather, it is a combination of systems related to race, social class, gender, sexuality, and nation. From this perspective, dealing with just one of these without also and simultaneously dealing with the others, will not lead to liberation. As a result, socialist feminists focus on a full range of oppressions, not simply the sex/gender system.

A great example of the socialist feminist movement is found right here in our own back yard: the [Chicago Women's Liberation Union](#). This organization, founded in 1969, was instrumental in articulating a new social feminist vision of society. For a peek at the "Socialist Feminism" document pictured below from their archives, [click this link](#).



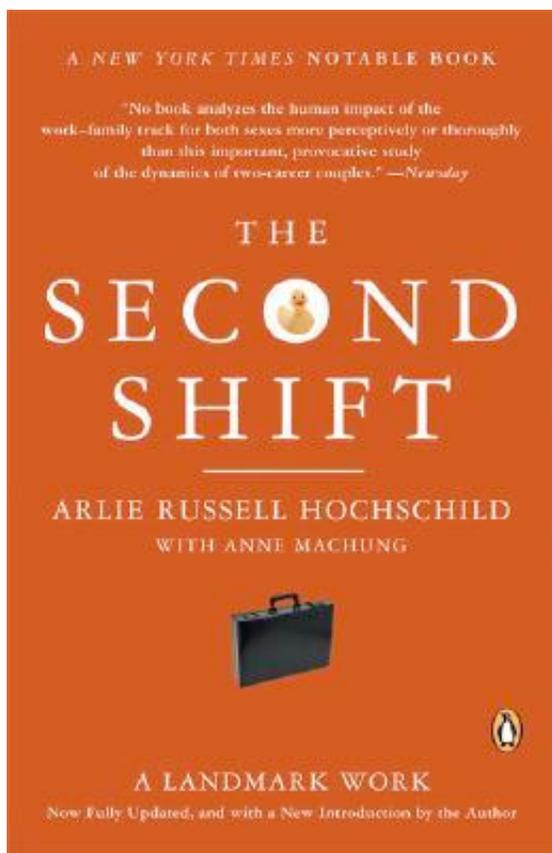


The CWLU published the above document in 1969. This document is useful in understanding the full range of concern among socialist feminists, including the world of work, health, racial relations, capitalism and its connections with physical force, among others. The following bullet-point "vision statement" appears in their 1969 publication.

"The following would be among the things we envision in the new order, part of everyday life for all people:

- free, humane, competent medical care with an emphasis on preventive medicine, under the service of community organizations
- peoples' control over their own bodies--i.e., access to safe, free birth control, abortion, sterilization, free from coercion or social stigma
- attractive, comfortable housing designed to allow for private and collective living
- varied, nutritious, abundant diet
- social respect for the work people do, understanding that all jobs can be made socially necessary and important
- democratic councils through which all people control the decisions which most directly affect their lives on the job, in the home, and community
- scientific resources geared toward the improvement of life for all, rather than conquest and destruction through military and police aggression
- varied, quality consumer products to meet our needs an end of housework as private, unpaid labor
- redefinition of jobs, with adequate training to prepare people for jobs of their choice; rotation of jobs to meet the life cycle needs of those working at them, as well as those receiving the services
- political and civil liberties which would encourage the participation of all people in the political life of the country
- disarming of and community control of police
- social responsibility for the raising of children and free client-controlled childcare available on a 24-hour basis to accommodate the needs of those who use it and work in it
- free, public quality education integrated with work and community activities for people of all ages
- freedom to define social and sexual relationships

- a popular culture which enhances rather than degrades one's self respect and respect for others
- support for internal development and self-determination for countries around the world."



First published in 1989 and updated in 2003, "The Second Shift," by Arlie Hochschild (pictured above), documents how gender inequality in society is connected to unpaid domestic labor. Even as women have entered the work force en masse in the U.S., there has been a "stalled revolution" on the home front; regardless of employment status, women do twice the domestic labor of men. Socialist feminists push for the recognition and respect of ALL work in society.

Summary of Socialist Feminist Thought:

- Socialist feminists agree that liberal feminism does not appreciate the depth of the oppression of women and basically only addresses the situation of women of the upper and upper middle classes. They also agree that women have been oppressed in virtually all known societies, but the nature of this oppression has differed because of the different economic realities.
- Socialist feminists do not think that the oppression of women is based solely on the economic system, and they suggest that patriarchy and capitalism are combined into one system. They believe that we must understand the continuing effects that colonization, imperialism, and racism have on the women of the world.
- Socialist feminists maintain that it is wrong to suggest that any one form of oppression is the most important or key form of oppression. Instead, they recognize that oppression based on sex/gender, class, race, and sexual orientation are all interwoven. To effectively challenge any one of these forms of oppression, we must understand and challenge all of them.

- Socialist feminists emphasize the economic, social, and cultural importance of women as people who give birth, socialize children, care for the sick, and provide the emotional labor that creates the realm of the home as a retreat for men from the realities of the workplace and the public arena. Socialist feminists see this as important labor that is overlooked and denigrated. They are concerned with the reality of what Arlie Hochschild calls the "second shift."
- Socialist feminists emphasize that within the workplace women face challenges of job market segregation, lower wages for the same work, and sexual harassment. They also recognize that the labor movement has been complicit in maintaining this.

NOTE: As activists, early socialist feminists organized themselves into women's unions in many cities across the U.S. The largest of these women's unions was the Chicago Women's Liberation Union mentioned above. These organizations took on a wide range of work projects. Some of these included projects on affordable childcare, the full range of reproductive rights and healthcare for women, comparable worth, and the unionization of women in low-paying female-dominated jobs such as clerical work. In many ways they didn't think that one form of activism was more important than any other form. Rather, they thought that *all forms of activism should be informed by opposition to oppression based on class, race, and gender*. After the end of socialist feminist women's unions, socialist feminists continued to play important leadership roles in many areas including the labor movement, the reproductive rights movement, and the movement to build women's and gender studies.

** This is modified from an original summary provided by Holly Graf, Professor of Philosophy, Oakton Community College.*