The study investigates how the Canadian press responded to the emergence of the anti-feminist group REAL Women. It argues that the appearance of this conservative organization offered the press the opportunity to begin to reconstruct the publicly available definitions of feminism.

Cette étude porte sur les réactions de la presse canadienne face à l'émergence du mouvement anti-feministe REAL Women. L'apparition de cette organisation conservatrice a donné à la presse l'occasion de remodeler les définitions que le public avait du féminisme.

Introduction

This paper will present a case study which will illustrate how news discourse reveals the micropractices of hegemony at work in contested fields of articulation. It has been demonstrated that the news media support the values of the liberal-capitalist, patriarchal order (Gitlin, 1980; Hall, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; Gill, 1987). Yet this relationship is not a simple or unilinear one, for hegemony is a process which is continuously negotiated.

Thus the press must be understood as discriminatory reconstructors of public debate and the selection procedures they adopt must be seen to represent a strategic response to the differences between their own ideological position and opposing ones.

Inasmuch as feminisms challenge society's patriarchal structure, they find themselves in opposition to the apparatuses of hegemony. It is not surprising that historically, the unpopularity of feminism as a social ideology can be partly attributed
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to its very restricted and unfavorable representation by the press (Tuchman, 1978; Morris, 1973). However, different feminist ideologies produce a variety of similarities and contradictions between the groups within the women’s movement (i.e., liberal feminism, marxist feminism) and particular institutions (i.e., the state, the press). It is from this perspective that one can grasp why, when the liberal press was ultimately forced to acknowledge feminism, due to transformations in hegemonic relations, only one was regarded as an acceptable oppositional movement to the exclusion of all other forms of feminism. In the press, a specific meaning of feminism was constructed, one which privileged a particular variant in order to engulf all feminism under a liberal banner, thus engineering a consensus between feminism and the liberal state. This was made possible because, although anti-patriarchal, liberal feminisms support liberal philosophy and observe the procedures of liberal reform, thus deferring to the state in matters of policy. By this adherence to liberalism, a process is triggered in which a series of contradictions or tensions with respect to their anti-patriarchal stance is produced between this form of feminism and the media.

Today, feminists must continue to promote their perspective within a social climate that is moving ever-steadily to the right. New discourses on the preservation of the family take a traditional view of morality and the social role of women. We can view the contemporary contest over meaning as an ideological struggle between liberalism and new right conservatism for hegemonic dominance. In the midst of the current right-wing challenge to liberalism, one particular voice has gained attention, claiming to be a response to the feminist movement. Canadian feminists, for the first time in their history, are facing an organized challenge by women as well as men—a situation which many writers have called an “anti-feminist backlash”. One group which has received considerable media attention in the last four years is the right-wing, anti-feminist coalition REAL (Realistic, Equal, Active for Life) Women. This study will investigate how the Canadian daily press responded positively to the emergence of this anti-feminist group in the mid-eighties. I will argue how the appearance of this conservative organization, although suggesting a challenge to the liberal foundation of the news institution, offered the press the opportunity to begin to reconstruct the publicly available definitions of feminism—portraying it once again as an extremist social perspective rather than a set of beliefs which had already been widely diffused throughout the social fabric. This paper will be divided into two parts. Part I will situate the “pro-family” movement in relationship to their right-wing, anti-liberal values. Margrit Eichler’s recent critique of the ideology of REAL Women will serve to illustrate some significant aspects of the anti-feminist movement which have been ignored by the press because they conflict with liberal-capitalist values. The second part of the article will look at the news coverage of REAL Women and illustrate how the press concentrates on the patriarchal aspects of the movement. Using such familiar journalistic techniques as the primary definer and the construction of strategic areas of silence (Hall et al, 1978), the media frame the group as a legitimate oppositional voice to feminism. In conjunction with this framing, the press will also be shown to modify its own presentation of feminism in light of REAL Women’s definitions.
PART I:
The Social and Ideological Context of Real Women

The New Right and the Discourse on Morality

It could be contended that active anti-feminist organizations are not isolated proponents of right-wing ideology but are intimately linked to a widespread anti-liberal movement. Such a contention clearly requires that the anti-feminist organizations be situated within their institutional and organizational context. Given that it is too broad a claim to be adequately defended in this study, I shall propose that it be put forward as a working premise. We shall consider the suggestion that the interconnected complex of right-wing groups can best be characterized as instantiating a ‘control paradigm’ (Goldstein, 1987), a particular configuration of power relations and discursive procedures which, in operation, runs entirely counter to the tenets of democratic pluralism and liberal individualism. One characteristic of the control paradigm which must be emphasized is that although it is strongly coercive, it relies predominantly on strategies for orchestrating consent, like the liberal-capitalist hegemony. After sketching this anti-liberal backdrop, I shall proceed to a detailed consideration of the Canadian anti-feminist organization, REAL Women.

The circumstances surrounding the rise of right wing conservatism in North America are too complicated to be fully addressed within the context of this study. However, the link between anti-feminism and the New Right can be illustrated by the work of Phyllis Schlafly and her anti-ERA crusade—which presented a challenge to American feminists in the seventies and continues to undermine the movement throughout the eighties. When Schlafly’s Eagle Forum waged their successful campaign against the American Equal Rights Amendment in the early eighties, they were supported in these efforts by fundamentalists, the Mormon Church, the John Birch Society and a number of other right-leaning lobby groups (Conway and Siegelman, 1984:417). Whether or not we choose to see Schlafly’s activities as the precedent for Canadian anti-feminism, we must at least recognize the growing popularity of her anti-liberal, anti-homosexual, “pro-family” perspective. There is clear evidence of a growing right-wing contingency in Canada, of which groups like REAL Women and an increasingly well organized “pro-life” movement are good examples.1

One of the central ideological underpinnings of the control paradigm is a particular form of (Judeo)-Christian fundamentalism which provides the shared horizon of meaning for anti-feminist groups, various right wing political lobby groups and an array of explicitly religious organizations. Conway and Siegelman comment:

In the eighties, with the marriage of religion and politics fully consummated, the threat of the fundamentalist right has emerged full-blown, and its arrival on the national scene has coincided with the blossoming of similar fundamentalist hybrids around the world... The thrust of the reaction is not merely one of public persuasion but one of control. (Conway and Siegelman, 1984:247)
In a similar vein, Richard Goldstein describes the contemporary discourse on traditional values to be an example of the "control paradigm", which he further defines as:

...a model of clear and present danger that can be expanded to implicate and oppress multitudes. It begins with a real problem - for example, teenage pregnancy. The obvious response would be to provide sex education, birth control, abortion. Instead the New Sobriety preaches abstinence and instills guilt about sexual activity. By the same logic, the fear of AIDS becomes the occasion for a wholesale libidinal purge, and measures that might enable millions of people to safely maintain their sexual activity are avoided in favor of continence...In each of these situations, a problem provides the pretext to regulate 'undesirable' behaviour. The objective has less to do with personal safety than with social control. (1987:24, my emphasis)

Goldstein regards the discourse of the "New Sobriety"—primarily a discourse on the purity of the body which has manifested itself in a massive media campaign against drugs, alcohol and "promiscuous" sex—as part and parcel of the larger discourse on traditional morality. Many elements of the New Right ideology clearly define it as anti-liberal. With respect to the New Right and liberalism, the issue here isn’t so much control per se, as who has the right to control and what is the rationale for control. From the standpoint of liberalism the fundamentalist ideology at the heart of the right wing control paradigm is both philosophically regressive and politically reactionary. By placing a particular concept of the individual subject at the epistemological and political centre of its philosophy, liberalism is a modernist discourse par excellence. The fundamentalist ideology is philosophically regressive because it is the manifestation of a discourse in which the epistemological ground is God. As a modernist discourse, liberalism cannot accede to divine transcendence being the guarantor of morality. From a liberal perspective, the New Right discourse is thus politically reactionary because it fails to maintain the inviolate centrality of the rights and freedoms of the individual. For the New Right, it is not the individual subject which is the centre but God, and this crucial shift has far-reaching consequences. For example, the fundamentalist-inspired camp seeks to abolish the constitutional separation between church and state (which follows from the above characteristics of liberal ideology), in order to define public policy in accordance with the authority of Biblical doctrine. This is an assault on the liberal values of individualism and democratic pluralism—which guarantee the freedom to hold and practice one's own beliefs.

The changes proposed by the right wing would require radical transformations between the public and the private (as defined by liberalism), primarily because they sanction the intrusion of public policies upon private lives. The New Sobriety is a clear example of this: the individual body becomes the site of control as the state or a specific corporation is given the right to randomly test for the use of drugs, alcohol,
and even tobacco. Conservative policies on abortion, pornography, and homosexuality seek to control the private body in similar ways. It is not only through the regulation of sexuality, through strategies designed to restrict it to monogamous-procreative sexuality, but in addition, through revised laws on divorce, daycare, affirmative action programs and equal pay laws that the New Right attempts to control the definition of the family and secure a privileged position for it in society. Such coordinated strategies have the aim of limiting the choices available to the individual in both the public and private realms. In effect these strategies say that the individual is not autonomous, does not have control over the private, and is not to be granted the freedom to choose among a range of possible lifestyles. Choices are restricted to those defined by a particular conjunction of Biblical and corporatist authorities. Insofar as a particular set of relations between the public and the private are the definitive features of liberalism (Eisenstein, 1981), the main objectives of the fundamentalist-suffused control paradigm are vehemently anti-liberal. As we shall see, REAL Women’s anti-liberal stance can be partly attributed to the fact that they seek to displace the constituting subject as individual with a coordinated array of other sources of authority—the non-welfare state, the (fundamentalist) church, the patriarchal family, and the invisible centre, God.

The Emergence of REAL Women

In 1983 REAL Women organized their opposition to Canadian feminism, targeting it as a major threat to the well-being of the family. They defined themselves as a “national organization of independent women (working and non-working) concerned with the preservation of family values” (The Toronto Star, Feb.2,1984), claiming to represent the viewpoint of the majority of Canadian women in this respect. They are but one group in a growing “pro-family” coalition which includes such organizations as the Alberta Federation of Women United for Families, the Saskatchewan Federation of Women, and Renaissance International (Eichler,1985). Of these groups REAL Women have received the most media attention and explicitly define themselves as anti-feminist. They are against abortion, universal daycare, affirmative action programs, the concept of equal pay for work of equal value and no-fault divorce. In addition REAL Women have spoken out against promiscuity, pornography, homosexuality and prostitution. In a letter to The Toronto Star on March 26, 1984 the president of REAL Women, Grace Petrasek, defended the need for her organization, pointing to the “crisis” of “the ever escalating breakdown of families, wife-battering, runaway teenagers and child abuse”.

As in the discourse of the New Sobriety, the logic of crisis is the most prevalent strategy employed by REAL Women to link social problems with the need for social control and, ultimately, to justify their own existence.

One feminist organization in particular, The National Action Committee on the Status of Women, has been the consistent focus of their criticism, to the exclusion of all other feminist groups. The NAC, Canada’s largest women’s organization, is an
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umbrella organization for a number of smaller women's groups (one cannot join NAC as an individual). It is essentially a lobby group, formed in the sixties under the leadership of Laura Sabia, which prepares and submits briefs to the government and holds an annual parliamentary conference. A large portion of its funding comes from the federal government. REAL Women opposes most of the NAC's feminist policies, with the exception of pensions for homemakers and increases in family allowances. They also agree with the NAC's anti-pornography stand but claim to have "a broader definition of pornography" (which extends to the teaching of sex education in schools).

Not surprisingly, the ideology of REAL Women has become the object of some recent feminist criticism. Margrit Eichler bases her critique on REAL Women publications, reports from their first national conference, news articles, and personal witness accounts. She reveals why the "pro-family" movement and feminists could not work together, despite many of their similar "concerns with respect to the status of housewives, wives and mothers" (Eichler, 1985:11). The "pro-family" movement's positions on such controversial issues as reproductive choice, universal daycare, sex education in schools and the rights of homosexuals and lesbians reveal, as Eichler shows, "a gap between the rhetoric of the so-called 'pro-family' movement and its true concerns". (1985:11) Eichler characterizes their position on abortion as "the most important dividing issue" between the "pro-family" movement and feminists. Here, she makes the crucial link between REAL Women and the "pro-life" movement:

Gwen Landolt indicated in her speech at the Realwomen conference... that the pro-family movement has emerged from the pro-fetus movement... Some of the people active in the "pro-family" movement have been, and continue to be, active in the anti-abortion movement. (Eichler,1985:31,n20)

The "pro-family" movement is against abortion under any circumstances, except when the life of the women is at stake. Many people who would not define themselves as "pro-family" undoubtedly feel this way, as might some feminists. The essential difference, as Eichler aptly points out, is that the "pro-family" movement would restrict the rights of all women to have abortions, regardless of whether or not they agreed with the "pro-life" position. This is quite different from free choice on abortion, a notion emphasized by some feminists, which stems from the discourse of liberal democracy (Dubinsky,1985). The anti-abortion stance, together with the "pro-family" movement's position on contraception and pre-marital sex (all of which they want restricted through a combination of legal reform, funding cuts and personal abstinence) is clearly an attempt to control the private lifestyles of people and, with respect to these issues, to limit their freedom to believe and act in accordance with their own individual decisions. The anti-liberal perspective of groups such as REAL Women is thus an almost perfect echo of the positions adopted by organizations belonging to the American New Right. This becomes more apparent when one considers their stance against sex education in schools and homosexuality, a stance
which of itself has nothing to do with a pro-patriarchal, anti-feminist perspective and much to do with a fundamentalist view of sexuality.

Eichler repudiates the labels which these movements adopt. She feels that the terms “pro-life” and “pro-family” misrepresent the true beliefs of groups such as REAL Women. Although they lobby for the right to life of the fetus, they do not protest against the nuclear arms race or capital punishment, nor do they work actively to prevent world hunger and disease. Eichler argues that “anti-abortion groups typically do not accept such pro-life positions in national and international politics” (1985,13). Eichler feels that the term “pro-fetus” suggests a more accurate characterization of their position on this issue.

She finds similar problems in their use of the term “pro-family”. The REAL Women charter of incorporation states their aim as “(t)o promote, secure and defend legislation which upholds the Judeo-Christian view of traditional marriage and family” (quoted in Eichler,1985:24, my emphasis). Eichler characterizes their view of “the family” as a traditional one where the husband is provider and the wife is homemaker. This relationship would be upheld through restrictions on daycare, and the abolition of birth control, abortion, equal pay laws, and affirmative action programs.

Apart from the problems involved in returning to this traditional family relationship—one of which would be the collapse of the Canadian economy—Eichler argues how this narrow view of the family supports only one type of family, the patriarchal sort, to the exclusion (and detriment) of all others. Therefore, their use of the term “pro-family” cannot be justified; she suggests the “Movement for the Restoration of the Patriarchal Family” (1985:27).

We can thus also characterize REAL Women as a pro-patriarchal group given that the majority of their policies favor a view of the family in which women are once again dependent on men for support. Women’s options for breaking out of an oppressively structured private realm would once again be severely restricted. That is, women would even be denied the option of breaking out of the private realm as liberal feminists: as primarily atomistic individuals willing to make the gender-based struggle secondary to their subservience to the liberal State and to their role under capital. It is also apparent from REAL Women’s statement regarding their aims, that their policy proposals are located within a traditional Judeo-Christian understanding of marriage and the family.

Having discussed the ideological context of REAL Women, and their positions on different issues, I will now look at the way in which the press has reported on the organization’s emergence.
PART II: NEWS COVERAGE OF REAL WOMEN.

In the previous section I situated REAL Women within its political and ideological context as being anti-liberal and pro-patriarchal. Considering that the press is supportive of liberal ideology, the questions remain as to why and how they would represent a movement like REAL Women. Despite the shared patriarchal perspective of the latter organization and the press, the type of control paradigm REAL Women ultimately represent, if extended to areas beyond those on which it currently focuses (the body, sexuality, the family, and education) could potentially effect news content even more restrictively than the liberal-capitalist hegemony. In this respect the press essentially faces a similar dilemma in recognizing and representing REAL Women as they have faced with feminism—a dilemma for which the press’s solution was to emphasize feminism’s liberal reform activities over the latter’s more radical, anti-patriarchal stance (Gill, 1987). Since REAL Women emerged as a response to feminism, we can suggest that the liberal press is confronted with the same options for how to deal with the former as they were for the latter. The news could: (1) ignore them completely; (2) discredit them through derisive and disparaging coverage; (3) provide full and accurate coverage of their range of ideological positions; or (4) attempt to coopt them through selective reporting—which, in this case, would mean incorporating the discourse of patriarchy into the news, while leaving out the radical, anti-liberalism. After isolating which option the press selected, the question of why can be addressed by attempting to discern the logic which supports this selection.

Unlike early coverage of the feminist movement, the reporting on the birth of REAL Women appeared to be full and respectable. The press neither ignored the group nor discredited it. When REAL Women made their public debut in 1984, The Globe and Mail and The Toronto Star ran full-length features on their first press conference. The Montreal Gazette, although devoting less space to the event, still gave it two columns in their “Living” section, the same location in which it was placed by The Globe and Mail. The Toronto Star treated it more as a hard news story, placing it on the fourteenth page of the news section.

The following overview of the coverage will focus on how the news frames REAL Women and how they frame feminism in relation to this “pro-family” group. The sample is restricted to four main events in the history of REAL Women which the three above-mentioned dailies have covered. They are: the press conference at the Royal York hotel in Toronto on February 1, 1984; REAL Women’s first national conference at the Royal York in February of 1985; their first meeting with Liberal and Conservative MPs in November of 1985; and the second rejection of their application for federal funding in December of 1986. The two crucial points which emerged from my analysis are: (1) the way the news sets up an oppositional frame between REAL Women and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women; and (2) the way the news constructs the anti-feminist movement as a “new” movement and in the process attempts to present patriarchy in a new light.
The Anti-Feminist Frame

The four REAL Women events are framed similarly in the three papers, with the exception of one article which will be dealt with later. Most notable in the initial coverage is the way the papers position REAL Women's spokespeople as the primary definers who set "the limit for all subsequent discussion by framing what the problem is" (Hall et al., 1978). Feminists, in turn, function as respondents. Both The Toronto Star ("REAL women set to fight feminists") and The Montreal Gazette ("New women's group plans to lobby against 'feminists' ") framed REAL Women primarily as an opposition to feminism and this became the focus of their articles. Furthermore, and according to REAL Women's specifications, they position the National Action Committee on the Status of Women as an "official" opposition. When looking for a feminist response to the charges of REAL Women, The Toronto Star approached then NAC president Doris Anderson. The Gazette, although not quoting anyone from the NAC reproduced a short biography of the latter group following its description of REAL Women—a discursive form resembling the introduction of two prizefighters before a boxing match.

This frame of opposition is significant in two ways. First, REAL Women's definition of themselves as an anti-feminist group shifts the focus from the degree of their involvement in the anti-abortion movement. In fact, The Toronto Star hardly mentions it and The Gazette, while connecting the group's legal counsel, Gwen Landolt, to the Right to Life Association, does not consider it to be an issue. The early news articles on REAL Women almost completely ignore the religious roots and commitments which underlie this and many of their other anti-feminist positions. It wasn't until four years after their founding (in April of 1987), that an article summarizing Lorna Erwin's work, connecting religion to current anti-feminist activity, made it to the front page of The Globe and Mail. The absence of a religious context from the early coverage can certainly be considered a strategic area of silence (Hall, 1978), although religion seems to have been strategically played down by REAL Women in their own public discourse. Their religious beliefs would not necessarily delegitimize them, but would marginalize them more than they wish to be, as this would explicitly link them to the fundamentalist right. The press' omission of their obvious connection to the "pro-life" movement demonstrates a selective approach to defining REAL Women as a movement.

Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, framing the NAC as "the official opposition" effects an even greater closure on the variety of feminist groups which can enter the public discourse. As REAL Women participate more in this discourse through their efforts to orchestrate a consensus for anti-feminism, they will continue to reinforce their definition of one liberal organization, the NAC, as the expression of feminism in Canada, with consequences not only for the NAC, but also for non-liberal feminist groups struggling to be heard. Moreover, REAL Women attempts to define the NAC as a radical feminist group, citing their policies on no-fault divorce, universal day care, legalized prostitution and equal pay laws to be examples of an
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"extremist view". (The Toronto Star, Nov.20, 1985) The newspapers reproduced the radical label in eight out of eleven articles written about REAL Women and the NAC (one of the three remaining articles uses the term "traditional" feminism). The significance of using REAL as primary definers is clear: the press no longer have to portray what they consider to be the radicalism of reformist feminism—they need only quote someone else.

Eichler's research reveals some of REAL Women's extreme statements which were available to the press, but were not reproduced by them. For example, Catherine Bolger, a lecturer at the national conference, expressed her views on birth control:

...it is documented that the pill knocked out the libido (sex urge) in many women and left them hostile to men. I would go a step further and suggest that there is probably a relationship in the suppression of the maternal instinct [which we learn elsewhere is generated by taking the pill, M.E.] and child battering, which is rampant today. (Catherine Bolger quoted in Eichler,1985:2)

Eichler paraphrases another speaker, Anne de Vos, who claimed:

Feminists are obsessed with power, but they have not discovered the real power of women through being feminine. To the degree that women engage in promiscuous sexuality before marriage they have created violence and abuse. 'Women' she says literally 'should kneel for peace.' (Eichler,1985:4)

Eichler relates how one speaker at the conference, David Scott, referred to feminists as the "third assailters": women who were assaulted by their parents and now assault their own children. It is purportedly these women, working in abortion clinics and battered women's shelters, who advocate leaving the marital family and terminating pregnancies. Allegedly, the "third assailters" counsel abortions because their own self-image is that of an "unwanted child", manifesting itself in a transferen-ce to the fetus. The "pro-family" movement believes that returning to a social arrangement like the patriarchal family will put an end to problems generated by the feminists—such as wife and child abuse and even incest.

Such statements, of which there are many more examples, are quite different from ones which simply accuse the feminist movement of alienating women and neglecting housewives and mothers. The extreme position of this group vis-à-vis feminists is not surprising given the former's fundamentalist ideological leaning. One may wonder why a more representative sample of REAL Women's arguments against feminists were not reproduced in the news in order to better situate the charge of radicalism which the organization levels against its opponents. I will argue presently that the reason can be found in the attempt by the news to represent REAL Women as a credible opposition to feminism.
Re-framing Patriarchy

REAL Women have strategically defined themselves as a "new" movement—a tactic which is manifest in their use of a futuristic discourse: "You (their members) are the voice of tomorrow"; our aim is to "blaze a new path for women in today's society, building on the time-tested values of yesterday that served us well"; "There has to be a new wave for the future..."; "...(we are) the new women's movement, which will carry us into the 21st century...". The Toronto Star was particularly cooperative in reinforcing this self-definition for REAL Women. For example, the article which appeared in the February 4, 1984 edition, after the first press conference, began by listing some of the group's positions which contradict the feminist position:

- They don't believe in equal pay for work of equal value.
- They don't believe in a woman's right to abortion.
- They don't believe in hiring quotas to help women move up in the work force.
- They're not a bunch of male chauvinists.

While it may be true that they are not males, the attempt to define the ideology of REAL Women as something "new" rather than simply the reemergence of patriarchy in its female form shows both a misunderstanding of the concept of patriarchy (or "chauvinism") and uncovers the strategy whereby a traditional mode of thought is given new life and appeal. Patriarchy has retained its hegemony partly by winning the consent of women. Both men and women participate in patriarchy. So although REAL Women may not be "male" chauvinists they are still fighting to maintain a gender-based split between the public and the private and to reinforce the traditional places of men and women within these spheres.

The Toronto Star takes this frame a step further. In an article covering the REAL Women national conference in February of 1985, The Star reported:

While some women at the conference said they had supported the feminist movement in the past, they said they had become alienated because they had thought it has become too radical and has polarized men and women.

The article then quotes Judy Anderson, an Etobicoke teacher and mother, who is supposedly one of these alienated women. Seventeen days later, on February 21st, a lengthy feature article in the "Life" section of The Star, was entitled: "The women alienated by feminism" (containing a longer interview with Anderson). What is interesting is the way The Star took one individual's statement and transformed it into a way of characterizing an entire group of people who, we can speculate, were doubtfully ever feminists to begin with.
An Alternative Frame

A story written for The Globe and Mail on REAL Women’s debut press conference illustrates an alternative way of framing such an event. The article, entitled “Beating the Bush for REAL Women” (March 1, 1984), is different from all others in that it does not immediately set up the frame of anti-feminists versus feminists. It briefly mentions that REAL Women “set itself against the government-financed Status of Women Councils (federal and provincial) and the coalition National Action Committee on the Status of Women”. From there it goes on to try to establish the origins of REAL Women, their strong connection to the “pro-life” movement and the accuracy of their membership claims:

...the group’s anti-abortion stance overshadows its other goals, in the view of opposing organizations such as the NAC. Not only is the abortion issue by far the most controversial of REAL’s platforms, but virtually everyone who can be identified with the group has previously been active in what is called the ‘pro-life’ movement.

Although the fullness of coverage and extensive quoting still grants REAL Women a certain respectability as an oppositional group, the skeptical tone of the report and the journalist’s references to the “pro-life” connection suggest the organization’s broader ideological context. For a feminist response (although the feminist remains liberal), the reporter does not quote the NAC but Laura Sabia, who is described as the former head of the Ontario Advisory Council on the Status of Women. By not fixating on the NAC, the reporter resists constructing the story in accordance with REAL Women’s agenda and, as a result, the report does not manifest the same type of closure as the others. Perhaps, the most interesting aspect of the article is the final paragraph which questions REAL’s use of the word “radical” to criticize specific feminist groups:

Ironically, groups like the one Sabia headed are today labelled as institutions of “mainstream feminism,” with considerable government funds at their disposal. That, presumably, makes REAL Women radical in its quest for the “traditional”.

Not only does this statement problematize some of REAL Women’s definitions of certain feminist organizations, it recognizes federally-funded liberal feminist organizations as one type of feminism—“mainstream” feminism. While this might still fall short of specifically referring to other feminist positions, it at least suggests that they exist. Of course, this type of a frame appears only once and is never pursued by The Globe and Mail or the other papers. Like the other papers, The Globe and Mail subsequently sets up the opposition between REAL Women and the “radical” NAC.

Later articles in the three papers focused on REAL Women’s inability to get federal funding. Rather than pointing out why the government would not fund this organization—because most of the group’s policy proposals don’t support the liberal notion of equality—they played up the antagonism between REAL Women and their
feminist "opponents", emphasizing how the former blames the "'radical feminists' in the Secretary of State Department" for "doctoring files and blocking its applications for financing" (The Globe and Mail, Dec.12, 1986).

SHeftING MEANINGS OF FEMINISM IN THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Considering that the press is supportive of liberal ideology, the question remains as to why they represented REAL Women as they did (i.e., coopting them through selective reporting). As I have suggested, the ideological relationship of the news to right wing movements is no less complicated than it is with respect to left wing movements—in large part because both wings challenge the dominant hegemony. In this regard, it is likely that some of the views of REAL Women were too "radical", in both the patriarchal and fundamentalist-right registers, for the news to be able to reproduce within the frame of credibility it was constructing. That the news could turn a blind eye to a particular facet of REAL Women could be because the ideological threat of the organization's conservative fundamentalism was offset by the ideological usefulness of presenting an organized group of women whose patriarchal values, if not consonant with the dominant hegemonic bias, were even more pronounced. For, in selecting certain patriarchal elements of the discourse of REAL Women and omitting their extreme right-wing positions on these issues, the news nevertheless grants them a significant amount of legitimacy.

The appearance of REAL Women offered the press an opportunity to begin to reconstruct the publicly available definitions of feminism in accordance with propatriarchal discourse. This redefinition is important to the extent that it attempts once again to communicate the idea that feminism, be it liberal or not, is an extremist social perspective, rather than a set of beliefs which are now widely diffused throughout the social fabric. It is not merely that individual meanings are being displaced in relation to given reference points but that the news practices in question appear to be aimed at effecting a whole-scale shift in the spectrum of feminist politics. What would remain to be determined is whether or not such reporting has successfully modified the public understanding of feminism. However, given the past successes of the press in creating public perceptions of feminism—first, as a temporary insignificant movement; then, as a novelty movement not to be taken seriously; and finally, as an interest group campaigning for liberal reform—I would not underestimate their ability to engineer a new social consensus in the wake of an organized female opposition to the women's movement. It is one thing for REAL Women to define liberal feminism as radical. However, when others begin to do it, when liberal feminism indeed becomes one end of the spectrum, with the majority of Canadian women thought to be more moderate, then the reporting of REAL Women could hold serious consequences for both liberal feminism and ultimately for the revolutionary vision of other feminisms.

It is through the type of informal ideological alliances of convenience entered into by the press and REAL Women, in which certain ideological positions are highlighted and others occluded, that the restructuring of the available frames of
reference are effected and constellations of power are realigned. The primary discursive effect of REAL Women’s interaction with the news industry has been to displace the boundaries which define the marginal and the mainstream. It is in the interest of feminists to acknowledge the potential threat of such practices. The most effective way to begin to challenge them would be to expose the ideological interests of the “pro-family” movement—interests which are not only patriarchal, but grounded in a right-wing, fundamentalist ideology which the press has elected to ignore. It is only with such knowledge that a successful counter-strategy can be formulated.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles MacLeod of the Cult Project in Montreal has informed me that such white supremacist organizations as The National States Rights Party and The Aryan Nations have set up posts in Toronto and Caroline, Alberta, respectively. The Klux Klux is also beginning to establish chapters in western Canada. In addition, supporters of far right American politician Lyndon LaRouche have formed the Party for the Commonwealth of Canada and fielded 66 candidates in the 1984 federal elections (see The Globe and Mail, Oct.21,1986). A 1987 episode of CBC’s The Fifth Estate reported on how some members of the “pro-life” movement have begun to set up phony abortion clinics which they advertise in the Yellow Pages, for example. A woman will contact such a clinic, believing she will receive an abortion, but upon arrival is subjected instead to a graphic media presentation on the evils of terminating a life. Although this approach began in a number of US cities, it has been reported that ‘clinics’ of this sort have opened in Halifax, Edmonton, and Toronto.

2. Two characteristics of the discourse of the New Sobriety can also be found in the anti-feminist discourse. One is the ideological symbol of purity and naturalness—which, in the case of the New Sobriety, centers on the purity of the individual body and the primacy of an allegedly natural state of awareness. It is with an analogous discursive strategy that the New Right anchors its argument in the purity of the family unit and, through a familiar refrain in patriarchal history, attempts to speak of a natural function for women as mothers.

The second characteristic of the New Sobriety rhetoric is that it creates a discourse of crisis around its subjects: most notably the drug and AIDS crises. However, Goldstein points out that, statistically, there has not really been a sufficient increase in such things as drug abuse or teenage drinking to justify the use of the word “crisis”. Anti-feminists take full advantage of crisis as a mode of discourse in which feminists become responsible for the many abuses of society. Underlying the right-wing discourse on values is a view of feminism as an immoral movement—immoral because it has tried to undermine the sacredness of the traditional family.
3. It must be made clear that although I have repeatedly used the phrase ‘control paradigm’ to refer to the institutional and discursive complex which is commonly labelled the ‘New Right’, I do not wish to imply that the proponents of liberalism are themselves uninterested in the issue of control. The liberal struggle for a secure position within the hegemonic structure makes this abundantly clear.

4. At one point the NAC decided that, despite their efforts to ignore REAL Women, they should speak out against the escalating charges made by REAL Women. The NAC’s president, Louise Dulude, explains, “Our first strategy was to ignore them... We don’t like to have women fighting women in public. The media loves it. It’s like women’s mud wrestling.” (The Globe and Mail, Jan.12, 1987)

Although quoting this statement, the paper still frames the story as a “mud wrestling” spectacle. The title read: “Feminist organization taking off the gloves to fight REAL women”.

REFERENCES


