

WOMEN IN SOCIETY OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
1998 Pre-Congress of WSISA (Research Committee 32)
July 21-25, 1998 Macdonald College

Organized jointly by RC32 of the International Sociological Association and the McGill Centre for Research and Teaching on Women, the 1998 Pre-Congress generated a lot of heat, both physically and intellectually. Thirty of us gathered from 14 countries for the opening reception and dinner on July 21st at Tadjia Hall, the Faculty Club of Macdonald College, which provided a magnificent and familial setting for our reflections over the next few days. We were warmly welcomed by Diane Mather on behalf of the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and by Shree Mulay, Director of the MCRTW, from the perspective of the women's community of McGill. Early the next morning, we got down to discussions of the theme "Feminism Challenges the Heritage of Sociology". During this time, we thought a great deal about the theoretical heritage handed down to us by the sociological "fathers" and, in fact, the process of theorizing itself became the core of the debate. Do we need to work so abstractly? asked the more junior participants in the Pre-Congress, many of whom came from the Economic South. Don't we need to grasp in much greater detail the lived experiences of our subjects? The question raised by the more senior researchers from the Economic North was, in effect: How are we going to grasp the essence of an experience that is completely foreign to us if we have no conceptual "pontoons" to bridge the divide?

The discussion became more grounded as we moved into a process of rethinking development. Colleagues from the Economic south

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presented vivid images of women's lives in their countries, interspersed with interventions from their Northern colleagues with experience of economic and social development. We moved on to grapple with issues of gender, both in parallel to "nature" and "culture", and with respect to the use of the concept itself. Finally - and interestingly - a half-day session on strategizing for feminist living turned into a discussion of strategizing for feminist research - reflecting the scholarly community's tremendous commitment to encompassing women within the sociological heritage.

The evenings were by no means free of reflection. Film maker Gwynne Basen spent one evening with us, showing her new film on women and science entitled "Asking Different Questions", and providing thoughtful responses to our questions. National Action Committee representatives Anne Kettenbeil and Marianne Roy brought us up to date on recent NAC activities and Denyse Côté spoke on behalf of the Fédération des femmes du Québec, focussing particularly on preparations for the World March of Women in the Year 2000.

Plans were mooted to write up our Pre-Congress reflections as a volume in the series Advances in Gender Research. But inevitably many of the benefits of the Pre-Congress cannot be articulated in scholarly form: the greater and sometimes painful understanding of feminist approaches characterizing work in the Economic South and North; the fragmentation between seniors more profoundly imbued by the sociological heritage and juniors who are able to distance themselves more easily from this tradition. Yes, we challenged the heritage of sociology, but we also challenged ourselves.