# THEORIZING MEDIA REPRESENTATION
# OF ELECTORAL FEMINISM

Since the early 1970s, feminists' substantial battles about gender, race, and class have attracted media attention; the lessons from these have been incorporated thoroughly into some genres (such as TV soap operas). The media's representational practices are considered largely responsible for producing and privileging the meanings associated with feminist politics today (Douglas 1994; Rapping 1994), yet some media representations still construct women as Other: to politics, to finance, to the corporate world, and so on. Thus, even in the 1990s,

> [i]t is still news when women are running for office and taking charge of big cities, governors' mansions, and congressional districts in the same way it is still news when infants' mothers are called up and shipped off to war, and other women are flying helicopters into battle and coming home in body bags. In short: It is still news whenever women tackle any job American society traditionally has seen as male. What constitutes "news" is partly whatever editors or news directors decide and partly a hundred years of a tradition that has defined women and their issues as "soft" news, while politics is "hard" news and a man's domain. (Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994, 182–83)

The relationship between feminism, female politicians, and the news is still a problematic one, and its troubles are long-standing—well over a century and a half long. Historically, feminists have turned to electoral politics when their struggles needed support from government offices or sympathetic

legislators. The 1991–1992 election season was an example of just such a turn. Although it was unique in many ways, it was for female politicians another battle in a century-long-plus war of position to increase their numbers, and thus to increase their power and influence in local, state, and national offices. Unlike past battles with the same objective, however, these were high-profile, mass-mediated events that resulted in much positive publicity for these politicians and the issues they raised. Of course, some of these issues, such as sexual harassment, were made especially vivid and salient by their having been raised in the context of the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas Senate hearings. The experiences recounted and experienced by Anita Hill as she testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee personalized the politics of the hearings; they contributed to their affective context and to the way such affect was diffused among the women who then ran for political office as a result of Hill's experiences.

The Hill–Thomas hearings and the coverage of political women in the 1990s and 2000 were vitally important for legitimating feminism and reconstituting its public face, yet inevitably feminism also was constrained in its construction in mainstream media. This tension exemplifies the ongoing dialectic by which latter-day social movements are represented to the public and how these representations, in turn, constitute an ideological field. One of the standard methods for analyzing this ideological field consists of mapping recurrent appearances, omissions, and contradictions in reports about a public issue, for example, to see the messages in these patterns and to illuminate the power relations they obscure, but this should not suggest that media texts are semiotically monolithic; they are instead polysemic. Capable of generating multiple interpretations, meanings in media texts are contingent and never guaranteed. For media representation, this ensures that even at the level of production and distribution the most carefully controlled events may take on quite unforeseen lives of their own at the level of reception (Hall 1993). In the events I examine in subsequent chapters, both feminist and antifeminist political blocs work to signify feminism (i.e., fix its meanings) so that it will be advantageous for each group's own purposes. In the process of representing these struggles, media texts foreground some of these meanings while they dismiss, devalue, and even omit others. The resulting ideology reveals as much about the representational politics of media as it does about the role of women and feminism in electoral politics. An examination of feminism in electoral politics at the end of the twentieth century thus necessitates a simultaneous examination of the media processes that construct women's relationship to electoral politics.

## The Politics of Representing Feminism

One of the foundational beliefs of feminism is that gender is a culturally constructed, ideological category, the meanings and artifacts of which change over time as a result of historical conditions, thus far resulting in inequitable material conditions for women. Gender also is a naturalized category—something that has allowed its exploitation in the service of patriarchal interests for centuries. The various cultural meanings associated with gender, and the power differential that has resulted from these, have been justified by arguments about biology and gender-appropriate behavior. Social institutions have played different roles in promoting specific ideas about gender; some, for example, fundamentalist churches and conservative organizations such as the Family Research Council, are quite public and strident in their defense of a biologically determined gender hierarchy in which men are genetically programmed to dominate women. Other institutions, for instance, those of mainstream journalism, tend to associate themselves with a liberal philosophy of gender relations and to state their support for equality between women and men in public and private realms. Representations of gender are dynamic and subject to revision, most often (but not necessarily) as the result of struggles between women and social and political institutions.

Contemporary feminist theory also, and importantly, insists upon seeing gender as inextricably tied to race, class, and sexual orientation. In other words, because none of us experiences gender apart from these other forms of identity, feminist analysis must examine how these work together to produce cultural hierarchies (Spelman 1988). As bell hooks is now well known for pointing out, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation work together in different ways for different people; particular identity traits work as "interlocking systems of domination" (1990, 62) that permit some people to dominate while they push others to be dominated. This way of conceptualizing power differentials is a move spurred by poststructuralism and its theorizing around identity construction. It also is a move supported by a socialist or materialist perspective that considers differentially allocated material and symbolic wealth and how they are related to the nexus of gender-race-class (Steeves 1997). A socialist or materialist feminist analysis, such as that employed in these pages, necessitates a focus on critical objects that figure significantly into everyday life practices and reproduce patriarchal domination. Media texts, particularly news texts, are just such objects.

Although conclusions of media studies research support this idea, little research has been done in the area of feminist analysis of news. Those few

studies in this area point to a dearth of research on the ways in which politi-
cal women and so-called "women's issues" are covered in the news. Margaret
Gallagher's (1992) far-reaching review of trends in feminist media research
notes that a "feminist perspective of the crucially important genres of news,
current affairs and other factual media content is well-nigh absent . . . and long
overdue" (14). In part, the paucity of research in this area results from the news
having long been considered a male domain from production to reception.
That the news industry is male dominated is a claim that has been substanti-
ated often and across various media (see, for instance, chapters by Sue A. Lafky,
Maurine H. Beasley, and Sammye Johnson in Creedon 1993). Public women
and women's issues were, and often still are, considered not worthy of hard
news space, coded instead as more appropriately the subject of human inter-
est stories. This virtual erasure is particularly acute in coverage of women of
color (Gist 1993; Rhodes 1993).

Coverage that marginalizes women as news makers is cause for concern:
News accounts contribute decisively to the discursive construction of reality by
creating, supporting, or refuting cultural beliefs and practices (Rakow and
Kranich 1991; Rivers 1996), but simply adding women to the mix of news
makers is not an adequate response, nor is adding more women to the mix of
news workers. While both of these are necessary, they are not sufficient. As Lies-
bet van Zoonen (1994) points out, expecting drastic changes in media produc-
tion as a result of placing more women in producer (or encoder) roles rests on
two erroneous notions: that women share a common perspective that will be
translated into the texts they create, and that the culture of media organizations
permits enough autonomy for individual employees' decisions and preferences
to be implemented as conceived (64). To overcome these problematic concep-
tualizations, van Zoonen argues that the media

> can thus be seen as (social) technologies of gender, accommodating, mod-
> ifying, reconstructing and producing contradictory cultural outlooks of
> sexual difference. The relation between gender and communication is
> therefore primarily a cultural one, a negotiation over meanings and values
> that inform whole ways of life. (van Zoonen 1994, 41)

Following van Zoonen, I argue that news texts about political women in the
1990s act as "technologies of gender" by privileging a particular perspective on
women and power while overlooking others. These stories overlap and enhance
one another at times, and at times they are contradictory, but by publicly com-
menting on women's relationships to power, they always suggest what is and
what is not appropriate for women in the last decade of the twentieth century.

The Year of the Woman is an excellent example of this "technology's" complexity: at times, news accounts challenged some of the more intractable gendered myths with which U.S. society is suffused (e.g., that sexual harassment was a trivial issue, of concern to only a handful of radical feminists) and upheld others (e.g., smart and powerful women, such as Hillary Rodham Clinton, were necessarily manipulative and "bitchy"). Thus news narratives about "political women"[1] are rich, polysemic texts composed of contests for meaning around definitions of womanhood, feminist politics, race, and power; they are texts that can reveal much about the dynamics of these contests and how they function with and in the mediated public sphere. Although the concept of a public sphere has been explicated at length by Jürgen Habermas (1989) and enriched by feminist Nancy Fraser (1990), even these very thoughtful accounts ignore what McLaughlin (1995) refers to as the "mass mediation of public spheres" (155). That the institutions and texts of mass media largely structure public life and suffuse it with meaning is crucial to understanding politics and political campaigns in the contemporary United States. News media are integral to the process of initiating, perpetuating, and even expanding identities of persons associated with or thrust into the political–public realm.

Political campaigns, particularly presidential campaigns, have become ritualistically performed media events, events that gain importance and cultural currency, as John Fiske notes, "in the way that they give a visible and material presence to deep and persistent currents of meaning by which American society and American consciousness shape themselves" (1994, xv). In the two presidential campaign seasons of the 1990s and that of 2000, the political practices of women came to be media events—either as candidates running for office (Year of the Woman candidates and Hillary Rodham Clinton) or as a swing voting bloc ("soccer moms"), but their "persistent currents of meaning" were surely informed by inequities between women and men. For example, although women outnumbered men in the United States in 1991 (51 percent [U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992, 15]) and have been consistently outnumbering men in voting booths since 1980, as of 1992 the composition of most formal political bodies, such as legislatures, was predominantly male. In 1991, of 435 members of the 102nd Congress, twenty-eight were women, and in the Senate only two members were women (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992, 264). At the state level, women appear to be somewhat better represented: from 1970 to 1990, the percentage of women in state legislatures increased from 4.6 percent to 18.2 percent (Women's Action Coalition 1993, 22). The enthusiasm surrounding 1992's Year of the Woman may have had an impact on encouraging women to redress these gender imbalances: in 1990, the year prior to the beginning of the

Year of the Woman, seventy-eight women ran for congressional office; in 1992, more than twice as many women, 159, ran for congressional office (Women's Action Coalition 1993, 22). This sequence of events suggests the relationship Fiske describes above between media coverage of political women, particularly Anita Hill's experiences, and women's involvement in electoral politics.[2]

The material conditions of the late 1980s and early 1990s were coextensive with the end of Ronald Reagan's second term and with George Bush Sr.'s only term as president of the United States. Bush carried the Reagan legacy through his presidency by relying upon many of the same advisors as and espousing a political philosophy very close to Reagan's. The policies and legislation produced during each administration's reign influenced a wide variety of social and economic practices; these administrations were especially influential in legitimating and normalizing right-wing rhetoric: a combination of a *laissez faire* economic philosophy, conservative social policies, and fundamentalist Christianity. The New Right reframed issues and even dismantled policies that second-wave feminists had fought to create and manage. For example, as president, George Bush Sr. approved a ruling that was known informally as "The Gag Rule"—a ruling that prohibited Title X-funded women's health clinics from mentioning abortion if these clinics were to retain their federal funding.[3] Many feminists viewed this as an alarming attack on abortion rights and free-speech rights, both considered sacrosanct among feminists and free-speech activists. This was not the only manifestation of New Right principles during the 1980s and 1990s. Others are documented in, for example, Lawrence Grossberg's (1992) *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*. This is, among other things, a sweeping analysis of the sociopolitical landscape and climate of the 1980s and early 1990s that documents this rise of the New Right and its profound effect on culture. The rise to prominence of the New Right encompassed both the realms of formal policies and popular discourse and was "put into place through cultural rather than political strategies" (Grossberg 1992, 15), such as defining "family" in a manner that made it seem like the exclusive domain of conservatives—particularly those who claimed to espouse what they called "family values."

Both Susan Faludi (1991) and Elayne Rapping (1994) have discussed cultural strategies crucial to the New Right's opposition to feminism in the 1980s and early 1990s: media representations that derogated feminism as harmful to women and dangerous to sacred social institutions such as motherhood. Some cultural strategies, such as the "New Traditionalist" advertising campaign of the 1980s, blended features from both feminist and antifeminist rhetoric implicitly to condemn feminism. The New Traditionalist campaign

consisted of a series of advertisements that glorified domesticity and vilified feminism for failing women. The campaign did not advertise a product but a lifestyle: that of a group of women who had proudly jettisoned their careers to stay home with their children and attend to their home lives. Cultural anxieties about family, work, and domesticity were played out in this campaign that commodified femininity. It is worth mentioning here because of its similarities to postfeminism. In its rendering of sex-appropriate behavior, the New Traditionalist women's stories that appear in each of these advertisements implicitly blame feminism for making them and other women dissatisfied—a condition that they imply can only be addressed through domestic consumerism (Darnovsky 1991).

However, whereas the New Traditionalist blamed feminism, descriptive demographic information about U.S. women from the late 1980s to the early 1990s suggests that structural inequities—and not feminism—were likely as not at the root of any widespread dissatisfaction among women. These data suggest that women, particularly women of color, experienced everyday life in ways that may have primed them to desire change: change in their own life conditions and change in the ranks of the powers that governed them. For example, although the majority of women were married and running households with their spouses in 1991,[4] many women were solely responsible for sustaining their families. In 1989, a woman headed 1 in 5 families—up from 1 in 10 in 1970. Of these 1 in 5 families led by single women, one-third were living below the poverty line (Women's Action Coalition 1993, 40). Between 1979 and 1993, the number of female-led single households living below the poverty level increased from 49.4 percent to 49.9 percent for African-American women, and from 22.3 percent to 29.2 percent for white women (Taeuber 1996, 146). Part of this problem can probably be traced to the absence of child support payments coming into these households: in 1989, 57 percent of women living below the poverty level did not receive the child support that they were legally entitled to, while 42 percent of *all* women who were entitled to them did not receive child support payments (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992, 372). Clearly these child support payments were desperately needed in many cases: in 1991, 57 percent of all children living in families headed by women lived below the poverty line. Of the African-American children living in female-headed households, 79 percent lived in poverty (Women's Action Coalition 1993, 40).

Closely related to the poverty level of women in the late 1980s and early 1990s was women's income and employment. By 1992, 58 percent of women ages sixteen and over worked in the U.S. labor force; many of these were mothers (Taeuber 1996, 89). In 1992, 80 percent of African-American women and

73 percent of white women in the labor force had children under age eighteen (Taeuber 1996, 105). As more women than ever worked in the labor force, their median incomes decreased. Between 1989 and 1993, African-American women suffered a particularly large decrease of $448 per year overall, while white women saw their median earnings decrease by $17. White men were still the biggest earners of any workers, followed by white women, African-American women, and African-American men (Taeuber 1996, 89). The median earnings of both married-couple families and families headed by a single woman or man, of any race, experienced decreases between 1989 and 1993, but of all these groups, African-American women fared the worst, as their annual median incomes dropped from $13,553 to $11,905 (Taeuber 1996, 131).

Income patterns of women during the 1980s point to a rather large, class-differentiated wage gap. That is, by the mid-1980s, 10.3 percent of women earned more than $30,000 annually (up from 6.85 percent at the end of the 1970s), but the percentage of women making less than $10,000 in the mid-1980s stood at 18 percent—about the same percentage as at the end of the 1970s (Brenner 1993, 115). Brenner (1993) notes that these circumstances can create class and race conflicts among women:

> [W]omen of colour are over-represented among the low-paid workers who fill the service and retail sales jobs which have expanded in the 1980s to meet new needs generated by women's increased participation in paid labour (e.g., supermarkets and department stores open seven nights a week, fast-food outlets, childcare, nursing homes). (115)

Although some women have experienced economic benefits from feminism, not all have, and in this sense the divisions are very traditional in their race and class composition.

Despite their increased numbers in employment figures, women managed to have families along with working for pay. In terms of reproductive health, women had babies later in life than women before them, while their fertility rates remained at a fairly stable level (with some minor fluctuations occurring). Between 1976 and 1987, birth rates for women ages thirty to thirty-nine increased by more than 33 percent, while the 1980s saw a decrease in teen pregnancy across all ethnic and racial groups surveyed. (The latter is true of the 1990s as well.) Overall, the great majority of pregnant women (76 percent) started prenatal care during the first three months of their pregnancies; however, disparities appear when this figure is broken down to consider race. That is, while a majority of all pregnant women still got prenatal care within the first three months of their pregnancies, a smaller percentage of women of Hispanic

origin, Native American women, and African-American women received this early prenatal care (Department of Health and Human Services 1990, 1).[5]

The demographic picture that emerges from the figures above is that of a nation of women who differ significantly from one another along race and class lines, and who, together, exhibit a standard of living significantly lower than that of most white men. These sorts of differences hold true for legislative and electoral practices as well. According to Taeuber (1996, 319–21) and Costello and Stone (2001, 323), more women than men in all three major racial/ethnic groups in the United States voted in the 1992 election, and this has been the case in every presidential election year since 1980. Education level and employment circumstances both affect the propensity to vote: the more formal education a person has completed, the more likely she or he is to vote. Similarly, employed people are more likely to vote in presidential and congressional elections than are unemployed people (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992, 269).

These data describe the material, structural conditions of women in the United States during the years immediately preceding the 1990s, a field divided along gender, race, and class lines. Occurring concurrently with these deepening divisions was a shift toward conservatism in both politics and culture. Behemoth—and growing—media corporations helped facilitate this trend in many ways, making them, together, one of the most significant cultural sites for the circulation, naturalization, and legitimation of conservative politics (Aufderheide 2000; McChesney 1999; Scheuer 1999; Bagdikian 2000). Conservative commentators such as Rush Limbaugh and Pat Robertson, along with groups such as the Family Research Council, the Christian Coalition, and the Moral Majority, helped shape the terms of political debate and determine the vocabulary and boundaries used with complex issues, such as AIDS policy, abortion, and affirmative action in public discourse (Scheuer 1999; Treichler 1999).

Trends within media industries up to the early 1990s mirrored those in the larger context in terms of gender and the balance of power. As of 1992, according to Lafky (1993), most journalists were of "white male Protestant" stock (89), with 92 percent white, and 66 percent male (91). What is more, in a decade's time (1982–1993) the numbers of women in journalism did not increase significantly, and only a small percentage of these held supervisory or management positions: 17 percent of television news directors; 6 percent of "top" newspaper jobs; and 25 percent of middle-management jobs at newspapers (90). Many women reported sexual harassment on the job: 50 percent of female journalists polled in 1991 reported having been sexually harassed at least one time in their careers (99–100). Lafky (1993) adds that both television and

print news organizations are rife with reports and other signs of sex discrimi-
nation. Television news correspondent Marlene Sanders (1993) argues that this
is due, in part, to a lack of power among female journalists: "We are too few in
number. We do not hire and fire. We do not make the story assignments unfet-
tered. We do not have the proportion of top jobs that our numbers in the pop-
ulation or the audience justify" (171). This problem has been documented in
entertainment television as well (Lauzen & Dozier 1999a); it is one of the orga-
nizational practices that encodes gender into the structures of media texts (van
Zoonen 1994) and thus influences the media's technologies of gender.

## Enter Postfeminism

The persistent underrepresentation of women in media institutions, as well as
in important roles in other significant social and political institutions, was just
one part of the picture for women in the 1990s; equal in importance, if less vis-
ible, was the widespread attribution of this underrepresentation and gendered
power differential to the individual weaknesses of women rather than to the
centuries of discriminatory patterns against women (Coppock, Haydon, and
Richter 1995). When sex discrimination persists with little or no public con-
testation, as Brenner documents in her sweeping analysis of women's lives in
the 1980s and early 1990s, its continuation may suggest that the resulting orga-
nization of labor must somehow reflect women's own choices in the labor mar-
ket and not structural imbalances and obstacles (1993, 106). This is the flip side
of meritocracy: the notion that the few women who have succeeded and who
hold powerful positions did it strictly as a result of individual talent and mettle
rather than through a combination of struggles (largely feminist) to elevate
women's status and opportunities as a class. (This also is related to what Mar-
jorie Ferguson calls the "feminist fallacy." See afterword.) This attribution has
been crucial to the emergence of a *postfeminist* ideology and has been docu-
mented by feminist scholars whose concerns focus on the nature of postfemi-
nism: where it is found, and what it means to the future of democratic institu-
tions and politics (Dow 1996; Modleski 1991; Stacey 1993; Rapp 1987). These
researchers have registered alarms about postfeminist ideology, the presence of
which, they contend, undercuts political and cultural progress for all but a
select, elite group of women who have benefited from feminism yet dismiss it
as no longer being useful to their lives.

   For example, Judith Stacey's (1991) ethnographic study of a group of
women in the Silicon Valley identified a pervasive postfeminist mentality

among the daughters of former feminist activists. These postfeminist women took for granted the gains that feminists like their mothers had secured for them, such as the right to work in formerly male-dominated occupations for good salaries, while they denounced feminism as being excessive or irrelevant. This sort of contradiction—that of accepting feminist ideals while shrinking from being *labeled* as feminist—is what Susan Douglas (1994) refers to as the "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." problem. Douglas notes that this sentiment parallels almost exactly the sort of treatment that feminism receives in the media: that media seize on the "I'm not a feminist" portion of the phrase, while they persistently refuse to examine those sentiments expressed after the "but." Those sentiments, she argues, are very often expressed as part of a "profound" connection

> between the disavowal of feminism in the first part of the phrase and its embrace at the end. The comma says that the speaker is ambivalent, that she is torn between a philosophy that seeks to improve her lot in life and a desire not to pay too dearly for endorsing that philosophy. (270)

The "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." problem illustrates part of the effectivity of media ideology in subtly privileging this postfeminist notion.

An increase in conservatism and material inequity and a decrease in media accolades for feminism serve as the context for political women in the 1990s, and although the Hill–Thomas hearings and Year of the Woman emerged during a historical moment marked for its extreme and far-reaching conservatism, they were constructed in part from discourses that explicitly challenged some conservative rhetoric, especially on those issues that have been of concern to women historically, such as reproductive rights and abortion. In this way, they distinguished themselves as radical departures from both standard political campaigns and from the dominant ideology of the time. The challenges that these candidates posed to electoral politics and media coverage of them were considerable, particularly and explicitly with respect to gender and socioeconomic power. To challenge the political status quo, the Hill–Thomas hearings and Year of the Woman campaigns, for example, included feminist arguments about the power abuse at the root of any sexual harassment situation, and about how this is most often perpetrated by men against women. Foregrounding this argument in the media (and, further, that such persistent abuse could constitute a hostile environment for the female victim) required an implied critique of the imbalance of gender and socioeconomic power that emerged as being prevalent in political institutions during the months the media featured these events. In featuring this woman-identified struggle as

counterpoised against the male ruling powers of Congress and various federal bureaus and departments, media accounts exemplified an integral aspect of the hegemonic process—that popular resistance to prevailing power can result in social ruptures that may, in turn, shift the overall balance of power in a society at a given moment in history.

## Postfeminism and Hegemony

A postfeminist logic undergirds public discourse about the political women and "women's issues" foregrounded during the 1990s and 2000. Although Fredric Jameson (1991) has explicated the broad cultural logic that he argues is coincident with late capitalism, he does not broach gender and how it figures into the historical and economic conditions that he outlines. Yet despite Jameson's omission, gendered references pervade public discourse—particularly around political campaigns—and often are derived from postfeminism. Postfeminism is not antithetical to feminism; rather, it denotes an ideology constructed, in part, from various aspects of both first- and second-wave feminism.[6] However, at the same time, it rejects these feminisms' more provocative challenges, such as those grounded in critiques of capitalism and class privilege. Judith Stacey's (1993) definition has been crucial to my understanding of postfeminism, as has Rayna Rapp's discussion of it. Stacey defines postfeminism as the "simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second-wave feminism" (323). Further, such "depoliticization often takes the form of the reduction of feminist *social* goals to individual 'life style'" (Rapp 1987, 32, emphasis in original). Rapp notes that postfeminism dispenses with feminist collective politics as unnecessary: postfeminists claim that women have made gains because of feminism, but these gains have been exhausted for all intents and purposes; they take for granted rights that first- and second-wave feminists fought for, such as access to higher education, but simultaneously argue that feminism actually harms women, overall, because it gives women unrealistic expectations—that we can "have it all." However, Rapp argues that women who embrace postfeminism typically constitute a small and class-specific group: women who have succeeded in their professions, in part because of feminist work from past decades. Women who have not experienced such privilege seldom demonstrate adherence to postfeminism. Rapp's comments are reminders that postfeminism should not be generalized to describe the political commitment of most women, yet despite its narrow appeal, a postfeminist logic informs media discussions of public, political women.

While postfeminism comprises a number of ideological fragments, one primary claim undergirds it: that a politics of feminism is outdated, because the "playing field" for women and men is now level, thus "women have only themselves to blame if equality is not achieved" (Coppock, Haydon, and Richter 1995, 5). The other fragments are derived from this claim and extend it in important ways. First, and what Rapp touches on above, is the shift from a vision of collective politics for social change to an individualistic focus; successes *and* failures are attributed to individual women rather than to a complex formula of individual work, group efforts, and structural influences. Second, and in a similar vein (also mentioned by Rapp) is postfeminism's "lifestyle" character. In accounts in which it is invoked by name, feminism is not linked to a political agenda or history but is cast instead as an avenue to a higher-status lifestyle, with consumption of high-status commodities (Goldman, Heath, and Smith 1991). Such a commodification of feminism is readily evidenced in the many advertisements targeted at professional women—mothers, often—for products marketed to ease the burden of their second shift at home—once their paying work is over for the day. These professional women embody one of the assumptions of second-wave feminism—that women can, and should, be financially independent and able to develop in their chosen professions even if they choose to have a family as well. The value of education and financial independence though is not touted in postfeminism for its intrinsic benefit; rather, it is an inroad to a better place, a place with meals prepared by someone else, with reliable (if not luxurious) transportation, with a beautiful home, and with clean toilets and white laundry. This connection between feminism and consumerism assumes that women have significant disposable incomes, and it precludes consideration of the women who do not. This then is the third fragment in postfeminist ideology: that white, heterosexual, and middle-class women's issues can be generalized to all women, including those whose identities include none of these traits.

This postfeminist logic is elitist in its appeal and outlook, and in many ways it parallels the class interests of the political elite and media corporations of the United States. Postfeminism's relationship to these exclusive interests suggests that it might do some of the ideological work of legitimating these interests to media audiences—its ascendancy an illustration of hegemony in mainstream media during the late twentieth century. The hegemonic process, originally conceptualized by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (see, for instance, Gramsci 1971) in the early twentieth century, is a struggle for the ideological dominance of the interests of the ruling classes of a society through the institutions of civil society—popular media, for example. Hegemony

stands in contradistinction to a process in which class dominance is achieved through coercion and the exercise of force and absolute power (Gitlin 1987), those actions typically associated with the state and not with civil society. Hegemony exists when a population responds to ruling class ideology by "voluntarily" consenting to be ruled, and ruled in a fashion determined by the classes above them in the social hierarchy. Eventually this sort of power relationship comes to seem like the natural order of things rather than a construction that benefits a minority, often at the expense of the majority. The concept of hegemony is useful for conceptualizing the give-and-take relationship between the power blocs that struggle for control in any society and their relations with less powerful (what Gramsci refers to as "subaltern") populations.

Hegemony requires continual ideological work and gradual adaptation. When it is achieved, it is not through a process of inculcating false consciousness but through a process in which less powerful groups—more or less actively—capitulate to ideological positions advocated by power blocs (this process has been referred to by Herman and Chomsky [1988], as "manufacturing consent" for the prevailing order). Hegemonic struggles are successful only when the ideologies of which they are composed resonate and mesh with those of the subjects from whom cooperation must be forthcoming. In theory, political subjects will not consent to be ruled if their needs and desires go utterly unsatisfied. To achieve hegemonic power, the goal is not to exercise absolute power gained through coercion and violence but to gain that power that is secured through a process of usually nonviolent assent (Gitlin 1987).

One of the most significant contributions that Gramsci made to political analysis was theorizing the varied and complex relations between culture and politics, and how these relations could maintain and challenge hegemonic power. Indeed, "to think in Gramscian terms requires . . . an attentiveness to existing social and economic structure precisely to consider, rather than to occlude, the multiple factors involved in understanding the relationship between culture and politics" (Landy 1994, 75). A Gramscian analysis, therefore, is one predicated on a historically specific examination of relations between significant cultural and political institutions, such as those between media (including their texts) and their relations with electoral politics.

For Gramsci, the relations between the state and civil society were those that determined much of the fate of the subaltern, but rather than relying upon this broad but limiting dichotomy to theorize hegemonic struggles, contemporary theorists have modified it to reflect contemporary conditions and to depart from a polarized view of culture. Grossberg, for example, argues that today hegemony is fought for by a process in which blocs with "significant eco-

nomic power" struggle to lead through "a continuous 'war of position' dispersed across the entire terrain of social and cultural life" (1992, 245). Further, to be successful, a hegemonic struggle must "ground itself in or . . . pass through 'the popular'" (Grossberg 1992, 247). Appealing to common culture is crucial to fight and to win any hegemonic struggle.

The institutions of civil society, such as schools, family, and the mass media (in the United States today), are those most active in the production of hegemonic ideologies and in the manufacture of consent to them; today, mainstream media, as institutions of civil society, are crucial as channels of discourse and as power blocs with a major stake in particular outcomes of the hegemonic process (Bagdikian 2000; Gitlin 1987; Hallin 1994; Kellner 1992, 1995; McChesney 1997, 1999). Because the maintenance of hegemony depends on forging effective connections with political subjects, mainstream media institutions (and the content they create) contribute largely to securing consent to the ruling order by being the primary producers of the discursive terrain upon which cultural meanings that prescribe and proscribe practice emerge, get struggled over, and change. Mainstream media continually work at the level of common sense; that is, in order to be assimilated, mediated ideology has to appear commonsensical: "naturally" obvious and immediately verifiable. Gramsci used this conception of common sense to understand forms of capitulation to power.

Common sense is constituted from the fragments of unquestioned, and typically unexamined, thought that guide practice almost unconsciously; beliefs that are historically determined yet so seemingly fundamental that they come to seem almost instinctive. Specific commonsense beliefs vary from group to group and bloc to bloc, although society-wide commonsense beliefs also exist. In addition, Gramsci (1971) points out that

> [c]ommon sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life. "Common sense" is the folklore of philosophy and is always half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists. Common sense creates the folklore of the future, that is as a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given place and time. (326, FN 5)

The mainstream media of the United States figure largely in circulating this historically specific common sense, therefore playing a role in the shaping of popular knowledge.

In representing some ideas prominently and with a positive valence, the media legitimate them; over time, they become virtually immune to question.

In omitting consideration of other subjects, or subjecting them to dispropor-
tionate amounts of criticism, media texts encourage incremental movement
toward making certain beliefs operate as common sense in a particular histori-
cal moment. In this view, the media do not foist false consciousness upon vul-
nerable media users. Instead, media institutions engage in continuous struggles
for power (often ideological) with their publics and with political institutions,
such as legislative bodies, through the attempt to assimilate commonsense
beliefs that benefit them as profit-making institutions and as organizations that
wield a good deal of political clout in their own right (e.g., see Bagdikian 2000
and McChesney 1997, 1999, for accounts of media organizations lobbying to
influence the terms of the Federal Telecommunications Act of 1996—a law that
afforded enormous economic benefits to media corporations). This struggle to
naturalize ideologies as common sense is elemental to the representational pol-
itics that constitute media texts.

Gaining, maintaining, and strengthening hegemony all depend upon
articulations: connections from hegemonic ideologies to personal and political
practices (Hall 1986; Grossberg 1992; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Articulations
often are rhetorical links created to achieve specific political purposes, such as
influencing groups of people to accept a candidate's message. Stuart Hall argues
that as an analytic device, the examination of articulations "is both a way of
understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to
cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not
become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects" (Hall
1986, 53). Hall's words point to the importance of context in understanding
both successful and failed articulations; historical conditions must be right for
any articulation to take hold in the imaginations and actions of those for whom
it is intended.

A crucial part of the second-wave women's movement in this country,
for example, involved a two-step process of articulation: that of articulating
women—as a class—to an ideology of independence and equality; concurrent
with this move was an attempt to *dis*articulate *from* women (as a class) popular
discourses of hearth and home. In other words, the ideological work of the sec-
ond-wave women's movement consisted of disarticulating and rearticulating in
an effort to create "liberated" women—what Hall refers to above as "a new set
of social and political subjects." The articulation between femininity and
domesticity had been, to a large extent, naturalized: that is, it kept some women
out of the workforce,[7] doing unpaid household labor and caring for children
in the bosom of the patriarchal nuclear family, because these activities were
popularly represented as "natural" for women. (Articulations like this that rely

upon biology for their epistemological grounding seem to be unusually intractable; because biological explanations rely upon "natural" elements and processes, they are more easily accepted as "the way things are.") Such is the case with postfeminism in the 1990s: I contend that it has been naturalized, assimilated and reproduced by news workers: the journalists, editors, and, most importantly, corporate managers, all of whom make conscious and subconscious decisions about how to tell stories about women in/and politics.

An articulation, once made, is neither permanent nor unbreakable, although some articulations are steeped in such powerful imagery, symbolism, or materiality that they are practically impossible to break. In other words, to break these links—to disarticulate ideologies from political subjects and rearticulate them to others—is far from simple (Slack 1989; Stabile 1992). The more naturalized and hegemonic ideologies are, the more difficult their articulations are to challenge, indeed, even to perceive, yet these challenges do occur, and some, like the second-wave women's movement, can be considered successful, thus becoming counterhegemonic.

The way in which articulations have been conceptualized marks them as contingent and even mobile, although it is not the case that these attributes make them easy to disconnect and reconnect for use in other political projects. For applications within feminism, however, these features are crucial in understanding and theorizing the ways in which women are invoked variously for use in different political work, sometimes to oppressive ends. Chantal Mouffe (1992) thus theorizes the category of "woman" as "a multiplicity of social relations in which sexual difference is always constructed in very diverse ways and where the struggle against subordination has to be visualized in specific and differential forms" (373). Ultimately, Mouffe challenges feminist scholars to examine how different discourses construct women, and in ways that are never reducible to one single subject position, such as gender, race, or class. Such a project, she adds, helps "grasp the diversity of ways in which relations of power are constructed" (382). For a feminist media project, this approach necessitates an analysis of mediated discourses and how they work together to universalize their definition of women; in postfeminism, it is a definition with little regard for the particularities of a majority of women's lives and needs.

Gramsci's theory is useful for analyses of the relations between gender and mass culture because, as Landy notes, he insists upon a synthesis of the "discourses of politics, economics, and production and reproduction." Such an emphasis reveals not only "dominant discourses" but also the "heterogeneous elements" constitutive of representations that fix women in patriarchy (1994, 100). Hegemony presupposes struggle and conflict in the constitution of

meaning in dominant cultural texts (from media such as television, film, music, etc.). In feminist media studies, the analysis of discourse for the hegemonic ideologies it privileges and the articulations it creates and maintains has been limited mostly to entertainment texts. One exception is Steeves' (1997) use of hegemony theory in her study of newspaper accounts of a rape and murder rampage that occurred in Kenya in 1991 at St. Kizito Secondary School; she found that patriarchal beliefs saturated these news stories, coalescing around several organizing themes, or frames. Steeves, using Mouffe's notion of expansive hegemony, "a more pervasive and subtle type of hegemony, [which] is exercised by intellectual and moral leaders to create active consensus" (5), identified nine frames that reinforced what she refers to as "patriarchal hegemony" (40). These frames delineated the ways in which Kenyan leaders and news workers secured consent for their positions on the crime itself and on the trials of the male perpetrators afterward. Although some feminist interpretation emerged in the coverage of the events around St. Kizito, the hegemonic process ultimately worked against a feminist interpretation and instead privileged a patriarchal perspective on the female victims and survivors of the crime, on rape in general, and on heterosexual relations broadly.

In a similar vein, popular news accounts of political women in the 1990s serve to reinforce some and subvert other patriarchal beliefs about women's relationships to power. Ultimately, however, the expansive hegemony of mainstream media—in the context that I have delineated—is one that is not strictly patriarchal (i.e., beneficial mostly to men) but postfeminist; as such, it secures the ascendance of an exclusionary logic suitable to only a minority of privileged women in the United States at the end of the twentieth century. The postfeminism prevalent in news narratives is not only a phenomenon unto itself but serves as commentary on the status of feminism in the mediated public sphere as well. Just as postmodernity works as modernity's Other, and alter ego in some ways, postfeminism emerges from feminism and its vision of an activist sisterhood only to dispense with the notion of collective action altogether. The incarnation of postfeminism that I detail in this book is in part based upon an essentialist, cultural feminism (such as that which Alice Echols [1989], documents from the second wave) and in part dependent upon a neoliberal discourse of choice and individual merit.[8] That is, news accounts of political women during the 1990s seem insistent upon tethering women to their biological sex, claiming that they bring unique attributes to politics as a result of it. At the same time, these accounts valorize the individual gains and talents of female politicians and exhibit a conspicuous absence of an articulation to a politics of feminism (despite the impor-

tance of feminist agitation in forcing changes in laws and attitudes that enabled much of the success these women can claim).

Postfeminism is intriguing for what it suggests about hegemony: many women appear to accept a postfeminist set of beliefs, and they even embrace it, yet it offers no vision of transforming oppressive conditions and seems to contribute more to their continuation.[9] This postfeminist logic is predicated on an assumption that social and economic problems based on sex have miraculously vanished because of laws against sex discrimination and harassment. One effect of this, pointed out by Tania Modleski (1991), is that of "negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism—in effect, delivering us back into a prefeminist world" (3). "Prefeminist" is too harsh a condemnation perhaps, for one of the most appealing things about postfeminism is not that it advocates patriarchy (which I associate with prefeminism) but that it appropriates some aspects of feminism while rejecting other, more radical, aspects. What it rejects is twofold: a critique of patriarchy as a structure of oppression, and the use of collective action directed toward changing exploitative conditions for many different women, conditions that have an unfortunate tendency to persist when they go unchallenged.

Who then might be a member of postfeminism's club? Membership is exclusive: "at best 'post feminism' is a concept appropriate to professional women" (Coppock, Haydon, and Richter 1995, 182–83). Professional women are those who have benefited tremendously from feminism, yet the only aspects of feminism many of them seem willing to retain publicly are notions of free choice—especially around reproductive rights and parenting. The women who are not hailed by this class-specific discourse continue to suffer economically, physically, psychologically, and socially from a range of power abuses. The fact that their public voices are inaudible does not render their experiences with oppression nonexistent; it just moves them to the margins of—or outside—public consciousness.

An integral component of postfeminism is an emphasis on consumerism (Coppock, Haydon, and Richter 1995; Dow 1996). The manner in which feminism has been eclipsed by postfeminism in certain contexts suggests that postfeminism works better as a promotional discourse for luring new consumers to a proliferating set of products for today's new women. Studies of postfeminism's cultural functions point to its wide circulation in cultural texts. Modleski (1991) and Dow (1996), for example, have investigated postfeminist ideology in literary and film criticism and in television situation comedies and dramas, respectively. Dow notes that postfeminism's depoliticized character—rooted in class privilege and financial security—is perfect for mass mediated texts where

it works to sell products via television advertising to women: the largest seg-
ment of television audiences that makes decisions about which household
items to purchase. When considering postfeminism's varied appearances in
media texts, this class-specific aspect of it cannot be overstated for its potential
to draw viewers and readers into the discourse of consumption.

Stacey (1993) notes that postfeminism is coextensive with what she calls
"postindustrial conditions." For the participants in her study, these conditions
were based on a massive economic shift, post–World War II, from an

> industrial to a service-dominated occupational structure [in which]
> unprecedented percentages of women entered the labor force and the halls
> of academe and unprecedented percentages of marriages entered the
> divorce courts. Unstable and, often, incompatible work and family condi-
> tions have become the postindustrial norm as working-class occupations
> become increasingly "feminized." (324)

Coincident with this shift is another, noted by political economists, the emer-
gence of the "information society or information economy," characterized by a

> shift [in] the balance in the cultural sector between the market and public
> service decisively in favor of the market and [a] shift [in] the dominant
> definition of public information from that of a public good to that of a
> privately appropriable commodity. (Garnham 1993, 363)

Garnham's point is crucial in understanding the importance and utility of post-
feminism and its deployment in media texts. Postfeminist ideology, as Dow
(1996) argues, works to construct media audiences not as critically informed
publics prepared to organize against oppressive conditions but as individual
consumers for whom freedom to choose is of paramount importance as an
abstract principle, yet typically limited to exercising commercial choice.


## Postfeminism and the Media-Industrial Complex

Postfeminism is pervasive in media entertainment texts, as Dow and Modleski
demonstrate, but it is prevalent in news stories as well, if for no other reason
than its appeal to the "quality" demographic so desperately sought by media
management (Bagdikian 2000, 115). As research into the news, particularly
television news, has documented (Bagdikian 2000; Hallin 1994; McManus
1995), the line between news and entertainment has become blurred for a